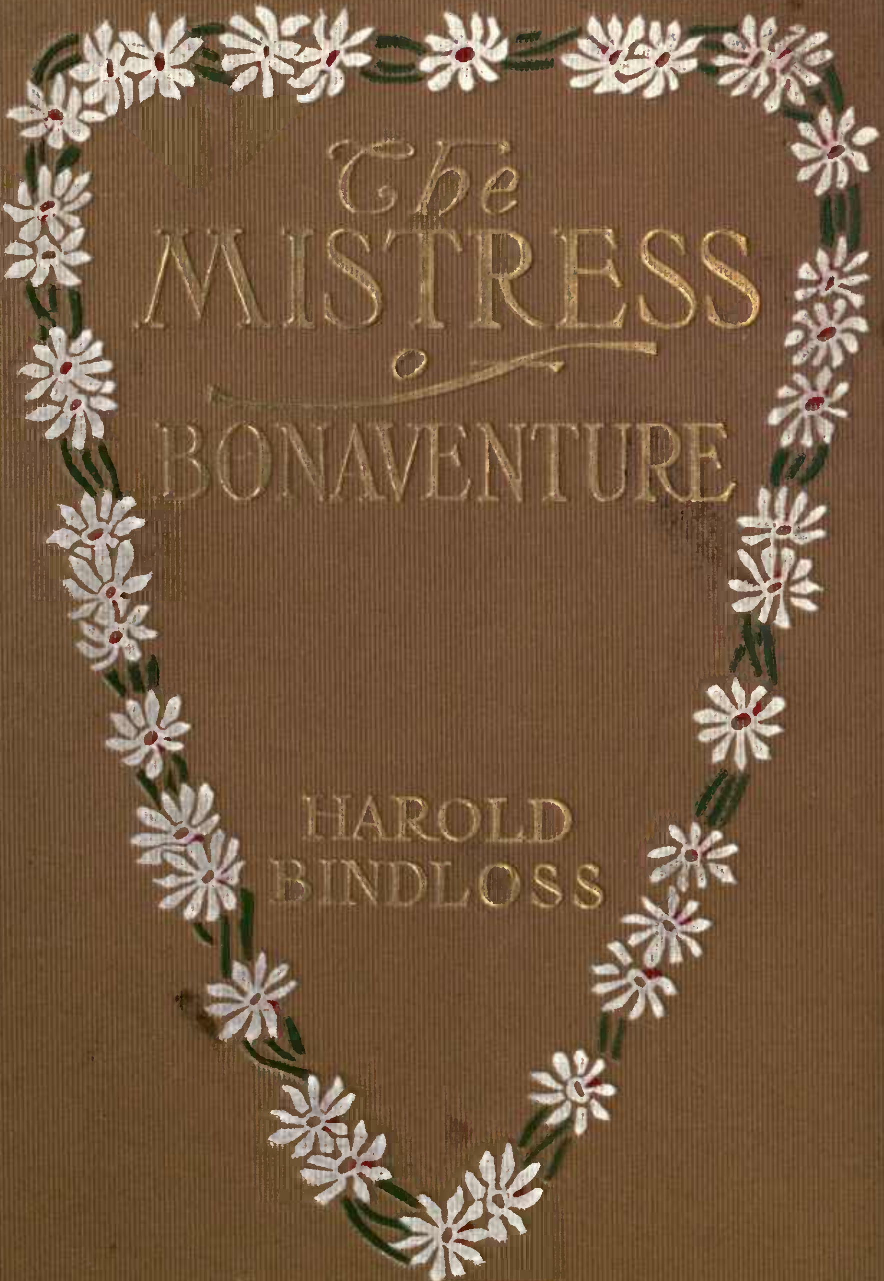

The MISTRESS of BONAVENTURE

HAROLD
BINDLOSS

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The Mistress of Bonaventure

THE MISTRESS OF BONAVENTURE

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THE MISTRESS OF BONAVENTURE.

I.

THE SWEETWATER FORD.

After relaxing its iron grip a little so that we hoped for spring, winter had once more closed down on the broad Canadian prairie, and the lonely outpost was swept by icy draughts, when, one bitter night, Sergeant Mackay, laying down his pipe, thrust fresh billets into the crackling stove. It glowed with a dull redness already, and the light that beat out through its opened front glinted upon the carbines, belts, and stirrups hung about the rough log walls.

"'Tis for the rebuking of evildoers an' the keeping of the peace we're sent here to patrol the wilderness, an' if we're frozen stiff in the saddle 'tis no more than our duty," said the sergeant, while his eyes twinkled whimsically. "But a man with lands an' cattle shows a distressful want o' judgment by sleeping in a snow bank when he might be sitting snug in a club at Montreal. 'Tis a matter o' wonder to me that ye are whiles so deficient in common sense, Rancher Ormesby. Still, I'm no' denying ye showed a little when ye brought that whisky. 'Tis allowable to interpret the regulations with discretion in bitter weather—an' here's a safe ride to ye!"

A brighter beam that shot out called up the speaker's rugged face and gaunt figure from the shadows. Although his lean, hard fingers closed somewhat affectionately upon a flask instead of the bridle or carbine they were used to, his profession was stamped upon him, for Allan Mackay was as fine a sample of non-commissioned cavalry officer as ever patrolled the desolate marches of Western Canada, which implies a good deal to those who know the North-West troopers. He was also, as I knew, a man acquainted with sorrow, who united the shrewdness of Solomon with a childish simplicity, and hid beneath his grim exterior a vein of eccentric chivalry which on occasion led him into trouble. The blaze further touched the face of a young English lad sitting in a corner of the room.

"Some of us were sent here for our sins, and some came for their health when the temperature of their birthplace grew a trifle high," he said. "I don't know that anybody except Rancher Ormesby ever rode with us for pleasure. Yet I'm open to admit the life has its compensations; and Sergeant Mackay has given me many as good a run as I ever had with——. That is, I mean any man who must earn his bread might well find work he would take less kindly to."

The lad's momentary embarrassment was not lost upon his officer, who chuckled somewhat drily as he glanced at him. "I'm asking no questions, an' ye are not called on to testify against yourself," he said. "Maybe ye rode fox-hunting on a hundred guinea horse, an' maybe ye did not; but ye showed a bit knowledge o' a beast, an' that was enough for me. Meantime ye're Trooper Cotton, an' I'll see ye do your duty. To some, the old country—God bless her—is a hard stepmother, an' ye're no' the first she has turned the cold shoulder on and sent out to me."

The worthy sergeant was apt to grow tiresome when he launched out into his reminiscences, and seeing that Trooper Cotton did not appreciate the turn the conversation was taking, I broke in: "But you're forgetting the outlaw, Mackay; and I'm not here for either health or pleasure. I want to recover the mare I gave five hundred dollars for, and that ought to excuse my company. What has the fellow who borrowed her done?"

"Fired on a mortgage money-lender down in Assiniboia," was the answer. "Maybe he was badly treated, for ye'll mind that the man who takes blood money, as yon Lane has done, is first cousin to Judas Iscariot; but that's no' my business. It is not allowable to shoot one's creditors in the Canadian Dominion. What I'm wondering is where is he now? an' that will be either striking north for the barrens or west for British Columbia. It will be boot and saddle when Pete comes in, and meantime we'll consider what routes would best fit him!"

Mackay knew every bluff and ravine seaming a hundred miles of prairie, and another silent man rising from his bunk stood beside myself and Cotton as the sergeant traced lines across the table. Each represented an alternative route the fugitive might take, and the places where the hard forefinger, worn by the bite of the bridle, paused marked a risky ford or lake on which the ice was yielding. Mackay spent some time over it, as much for his own edification as our own, but I was interested, for I greatly desired to recover the blood mare stolen from me.

I was then five-and-twenty, fairly stalwart and tall of stature, and seldom regretted that after a good education in England I had gone out to assist a relative raising cattle in Western Canada. The old man was slow and cautious, but taught me my business well before he died suddenly and left me his possessions. Adding my small patrimony thereto I made larger profits by taking heavier risks, and, for fortune had favored me, and youth is no handicap in the Colonies, my homestead was one of the finest in that section of the country. Save for occasional risks of frost-bite and wild rides through blinding snow the life had been rather toilsome than eventful; but the day which, while we talked in the outpost, was speeding west across the pines of Quebec and lakes of Ontario to gild the Rockies' peaks was to mark a turning-point in my history.

Suddenly a beat of hoofs rose out of the night, there was a jingle outside, and the cold set me shivering, when a man, who held a smoking horse's bridle, stood by the open door. "Your man tried to buy a horse from the reservation Crees, and when they wouldn't trade doubled on his tracks, heading west for the Bitter Lakes. I've nearly killed my beast to bring you word," he said.

Horses stood ready in the sod stable behind the dwelling, and in less than three minutes we were in the saddle and flitting in single file across the prairie. It was about 5 A.M., and, though winter should have been over, a very bitter morning. The steam from the horses hung about us, our breath froze on our furs, but a Chinook wind had swept the prairie clear of snow, and though in the barer places the ground rang like iron beneath us the carpet of matted grasses made moderately fast traveling possible. No word was spoken, and when the silent figures about me faded as they spread out left and right, and only a faint jingle of steel or dull thud of hoofs betokened their presence, I seemed to have ridden out of all touch with warmth and life.

The frost bit keen, the heavens were black with the presage of coming storm, and the utter silence seemed the hush of death. Beast and bird had long fled south, and I started when once the ghostly howl of a coyote rose eerily and faintly from the rim of the prairie.

By daylight we had left long leagues behind us, and I was the better pleased that the fugitive's trail, which we found signs of, led back towards my own homestead. For a brief five minutes the Rockies, seen very far off across the levels, flushed crimson high up against the sky. Then the line of spectral peaks faded suddenly, and we were left, four tiny crawling specks, in the centre of a limitless gray circle whose circumference receded steadily as the hours went by. But the trail grew plainer to the sergeant's practised eyes, and when we had crossed the Bitter Lakes on rotten and but partially frozen ice, he predicted that we should come up with the fugitive by nightfall if our horses held out. Mine was the best in the party, and, though not equal to the stolen mare, the latter had already traveled fast and far. It was a depressing journey. No ray of sunlight touched the widespread levels, and there was neither smoke trail nor sign of human life in all the great desolation. Hands and feet lost sense of feeling, the cold numbed one's very brain; but the wardens of the prairie, used alike to sleep in a snow trench or swim an icy ford, care little for adverse weather, and Mackay held on with a slow tenacity that boded ill for the man he was pursuing.

The light showed signs of failing when Trooper Cotton shouted, and we caught sight of our quarry, a shadowy blur on the crest of a low rise that seamed the prairie. "Ye may save your breath, for ye'll need it," said Mackay. "It's a league from yon rise to the Sweetwater, an' there's neither ice-bridge nor safe ford now. If he's across before us we'll no' grip him the night, I'm thinking—and there's ill weather brewing."

Whip and heel were plied, and the worn-out beasts responded as best they might. The man who had taught me stock and horse breeding knew his business, and when my beast raced across the edge of the rise the troopers were at least two hundred yards behind. Then the exultation of the chase took hold of me, and my frozen blood commenced to stir as the staunch beast beneath me swept faster and faster down the long gray incline. I was coming up with the horse thief at every stride. A dusky ridge of birches loomed ahead, shutting off the steep dip to the river, for most streams upon the prairie wear themselves out a deep hollow. There were thicker trees beyond it, and the light was failing; but while all this promised safety for the pursued I was gaining fast, and the troopers dropping further behind. He had just reached the timber when a light wagon lurched out from it, and I yelled to the man who drove it to hold clear of my path. There was a hoarse shout away to the left, and, when no answer came back, the crack of a carbine. A repeating rifle banged against my back, and feeling that its sling lay within easy reach I drove my heels home as I raced past the wagon.

There was scarcely time for a side glance, but the one I risked set my heart beating. Two feminine figures wrapped in furs sat within it, and one smiled at me as I passed. The face that looked out from beneath the fur cap was worth remembering, though it was several years since I had last seen it in England. Haldane had brought his daughters with him when he came out from Montreal to visit his Western possessions, it seemed, but my horse was over the brink of the declivity before I could return the greeting, and, bending low to clear the branches, I drove him reeling and blundering down and down through willow undergrowth and scattered birches on the track of the fugitive. I was a plain rancher, and in the meantime it seemed presumptuous folly to neglect my lawful business for a smile from Beatrice Haldane.

It was growing dark among the birches, and flakes of feathery snow sliding down between the branches filled my eyes, but I could see that the distance between us was shortening more rapidly, and that the man in front of me reeled in his saddle when a branch smote him. The mare also stumbled, and I gained several lengths at least. The drumming of hoofs and moan of an icy wind which had sprung up seemed to fill all the hollow. White mist which slid athwart the birches hung over the Sweetwater in the rift beneath, and—for the river had lately burst its chains of ice—I felt sure the man I followed would never make the crossing. Yet it appeared certain that he meant to attempt it, for he rode straight at the screen of willows which fringed the water's edge, vanished among them, and I heard a crackling as his weary beast smashed through the shoreward fringe of honeycombed ice. Then I saw nothing, for rattling branches closed about me as the horse feebly launched himself at the leap, while a denser whiteness thickened the mist. So far fortune had favored me throughout the reckless ride; but it is not wise to tempt fate too hardly, and the beast pitched forward when his hoofs descended upon bare frozen ground.

Had I worn boots my neck might have paid the penalty, but the soft moccasins slipped free of the stirrups in time, and when I came down the horse rolled over several yards clear of me. He was up next moment, but moved stiffly, and stood still trembling when I grasped the bridle. The saddle had also slipped sideways, as though a girth buckle had yielded and I felt faint and dizzy, for the fall had shaken me. Nevertheless, I unslung the rifle mechanically when a hail reached me, and turning saw the man we had followed sitting still in his saddle, with the stream frothing white to his horse's knees, some two score yards away. The daylight had almost gone, the snow was commencing in earnest, but I could make out that he was bare-headed and his face smeared with crimson, perhaps from a wound the branch had made. It looked drawn and ghastly as he sat stiffly erect with one hand on his hip and the other raised as though to command attention against a background of hurrying water and falling snow.

"You are Rancher Ormesby, whose horse I borrowed, I presume?" he said. "Well, if you are wise you will give the chase up before worse befalls you. I am armed, and give you fair warning do not mean to be taken. Go home to your stove and comforts. You at least have no quarrel with me."

The clean English accent surprised me, and the rifle lay still in the hollow of my left arm as I answered him: "Do you forget you are sitting on the best mare I possess? The loss of several hundred dollars is more than I can put up with, and your warning sounds tolerably empty when I could hardly fail to pick you off with this rifle."

I listened for the troopers' coming, but could only hear the fret of the river and the moaning of the blast, for the wind was rising rapidly. It was evident the beast whose bridle I held was in no fit state to attempt the crossing, and yet, though the stranger's cool assurance was exasperating, I began to be conscious of a certain admiration and pity for him. The man was fearless. He had been hunted like a wolf; and now, left worn out, wounded, and doubtless faint from want of food, to face the wild night in the open had, it seemed, risked his last chance of escape to warn when he might have taken me at a disadvantage.

He laughed recklessly. "Still, I hardly think you will. The mare is done, and I pledge my word I'll turn her loose as soon as I'm clear of the troopers. I have no grudge against you, but if you are wise you will take no further chances with a desperate man. Go home, and be thankful you have a place to shelter in."

There would have been no great difficulty in bringing the man down at that range, even in a bad light, and it is probable that nobody would have blamed me; but, though I would willingly have ridden him down in fair chase, I could not fire on him as he sat there at my mercy, for if he was armed it must have been with a pistol—a very poor weapon against a rifle. I might also have shot the horse, but one hesitates to sacrifice a costly beast, even in the service of the State, and, strange to say, I felt inclined to trust his promise. Accordingly, I did neither, and when a great ice cake came driving down, and, raising his hand again as though in recognition of my forbearance, he wheeled the mare and vanished into a thicker rush of snow, I stood still motionless and let him go. Then, feeling more shaken and dizzy than before, I seized the bridle and led the horse into the whirling whiteness that drove down the slope. Darkness came suddenly. I could scarcely see the trees, and it was by accident I stumbled upon the troopers dismounted and picking their way.

"Have ye seen him?" asked an object which looked like a polar bear, and proved to be the sergeant.

"Yes," I answered shortly, deciding it would not be well to fully explain how I had let our quarry slip through my fingers. "If he has not drowned himself in the river he has got safely away. I was close upon him when my horse fell and threw me badly. Are you going to try the crossing, too?"

There are few bolder riders than the North-West troopers, but Mackay shook his head. "I'm thinking it would be a useless waste of Government property an' maybe of a trooper's life," he said. "No man could find him in this snow, and if he lives out the night, which is doubtful, we'll find his trail plain in the morning. We'll just seek shelter with Haldane at Bonaventure."

I do not know how we managed to find the Bonaventure ranch. The wind had freshened suddenly almost to a gale, and, once clear of the river hollow, we met the full force of it. The snow that whirled across the desolate waste filled our eyes and nostrils, rendering breathing difficult, and sight almost impossible; but it may be the instinct of the horses helped us, for, making no effort at guidance, I trudged on, clinging to the bridle of my limping beast while half-seen spectral objects floundered through the white haze on either side. Nevertheless, the pain which followed the impact of the flakes on one side of my half-frozen face showed that we were at least progressing in a constant direction, and at last Trooper Cotton raised a hoarse halloo as a faint ray of light pierced the obscurity. Then shadowy buildings loomed ahead, and, blundering up against a wire fence, we staggered, whitened all over, to the door of Bonaventure.

It was flung wide open at our knock, banged to again, and while a trooper went off with the horses to the stable, the rest of us stood partly stupefied by the change of temperature, shaking the white flakes from us in the lamp-lit hall. A man of middle age, attired in a fashion more common in the cities than the West, stretched out his hand to me.

"I am glad to see you, Ormesby; and of course you and your companions will spend the night here," he said cordially. "My girls told me they had met you, and we were partly expecting your company. Apparently the malefactor got away, Sergeant Mackay?"

"We did not bring him with us, but he'll not win far this weather," was the somewhat rueful answer. And the master of Bonaventure smiled a little.

"He deserves to escape if he can live out the night; and I'm inclined to be sorry for the poor devil," he said. "However, you have barely time to get into dry things before supper will be ready. We expect you all to join us, prairie fashion."

The welcome was characteristic of Carson Haldane, who could win most men's good will, and, it was rumored, women's too, equally on the prairie and in exclusive circles of Ottawa and Montreal. It was also characteristic that he called the evening meal, as we did, supper; though when he was present a state of luxury, wholly unusual on the prairie, reigned at Bonaventure.

II.

BONAVENTURE RANCH.

"We are waiting for you," said Haldane, smiling, as he stood in the doorway of the room where, with some misgivings, and by the aid of borrowed sundries, we had made the best toilet we could. "You are not a stranger, Ormesby, and must help to see your comrades made comfortable. Sergeant, my youngest daughter is enthusiastic about the prairie, and you will have a busy time if you answer all her questions, though I fear she will be disappointed to discover that nobody has ever scalped you."

Mackay drew himself up stiffly as if for his inspection parade, and a white streak on his forehead showed the graze a bullet had made. Young Cotton smiled wryly as he glanced at his uniform, for it was probably under very different auspices he had last appeared in ladies' society; and I was uneasily conscious of the fact that the black leather tunic a German teamster had presented me with was much more comfortable than becoming. I might have felt even more dissatisfied had I known that the fall had badly split it up the back. That, however, did not account for the curious mingling of hesitation and expectancy with which I followed our host.

During a brief visit to England some years ago I had met Miss Haldane at the house of a relative, and the memory had haunted me during long winter evenings spent in dreamy meditation beside the twinkling stove, and in many a lonely camp when the stars shone down on the waste of whitened grass through the blue transparency of the summer night. The interval had been a time of strenuous effort with me, but through all the stress and struggle, in stinging snow-drift and blinding dust of alkali, I had never lost the remembrance of the damsel who whiled away the sunny afternoons under the English elms with me. Indeed, the recollection of the serene, delicately cut face and wealth of dusky hair had rather grown sharper as the months went by, until it became an abstract type of all that was desirable in womanhood rather than a prosaic reality. Now I was to meet its owner once more in the concrete flesh. It may have been merely a young man's fancy, born of a life bare of romance, but I think that idealization was good for me.

Haldane held a door open, saying something that I did not catch; but young Cotton, whose bronzed color deepened for a moment, made a courtly bow, and the big grizzled sergeant smiled at me across the table as he took his place beside a laughing girl, while I presently found myself drawing a chair back for Beatrice Haldane, who showed genuine pleasure as she greeted me. Her beauty had increased and not diminished during the long interval. The clustering dark hair and dark eyes were those I remembered well, and if her face was a trifle colorless and cold I did not notice it then. She had grown a little more full in outline and stately in bearing, but the quiet graciousness which had so impressed me still remained.

"It is a long time since we met, and you have changed since then," she said pleasantly. "When you raced past our wagon I hardly recognized you. That, however, was perhaps only to be expected; but one might wonder whether you have changed otherwise, too. I recollect you were refreshingly sanguine when I last saw you."

This was gratifying. That I should have treasured the remembrance of Beatrice Haldane was only natural; but it was very pleasant to hear from her own lips that she had not forgotten me. Her intention was doubtless kindly, and it was inherited courtesy, for Haldane did most things graciously.

"The light was dim, and this life sets its stamp on most of us," I said. "Might one compliment you on your powers of memory? Needless to say, I recognized you the moment I saw you."

Miss Haldane smiled a little. "A good memory is useful; but do you wish me to return the compliment?"

"No," and I looked at her steadily. "But there is a difference. In your world men and events follow each other in kaleidoscopic succession, and each change of the combinations must dim the memory of the rest. With us it is different. You will see how we live—but, no; I hardly think you will—for Bonaventure is not a typical homestead, and the control of it can only be a pastime with your father."

"And yet it is said that whatever Carson Haldane touches yields him dividends; but proceed," interposed the latter's daughter.

"With us each day is spent in hurried labor, and it is probably well it is; for otherwise the loneliness and monotony might overpower any man with leisure to brood and think. Heat, frost, and fatigue are our lot, and an interlude resembling the one in which I met you means, as a glimpse of a wholly different life, so much to us. We dream of it long afterwards, and wonder if ever the enchanted gates will open to us again. Now, please, don't smile. This is really not exaggeration!"

"Which gates? You are not precise," asked my companion; and laughed pleasantly when, smiling too, I answered, "One might almost say—of Paradise!"

"It must be the Moslem's paradise, then," she said. "Still, I hardly fancy a stalwart prairie rancher would pose well as the Peri, and, by way of consolation, you can remember that there are disappointments within those gates, and those who have acquired knowledge beyond them sometimes envy the illusions of those without. No, you have not changed much in some respects, Mr. Ormesby. You must talk to my sister Lucille—she will agree with you."

Her manner was very gracious, in spite of the badinage; but there was a faint trace of weariness and sardonic humor in her merriment which chilled me. The dark-haired girl I remembered had displayed a power of sympathy and quick enthusiasm which had apparently vanished from my present companion.

"I am curious to hear if you have verified the optimistic views you once professed," she added languidly.

I laughed a little drily. Being younger then, and led on by a very winsome damsel's interest, I had talked with perhaps a little less than becoming modesty of the possibilities open to a resolute man in the new lands of the West, and laid it down as an axiom that determination was a sure pass-word to success.

"You should be merciful. That was in my callow days," I said. "Nevertheless, with a few more reservations, I believe it is possible for those who can hope and hold on to realize their ambition in this country, whether it be the evolution of a prosperous homestead from a strip of Government land and a sod hovel—or more desirable things. The belief is excusable, because one may see the proof of it almost every day. I even fancied, when in England, that you agreed with me."

There was a faint mischievous sparkle in Miss Haldane's eyes, but she answered with becoming gravity: "Wisdom, as you seem to intimate, comes with age, and it is allowable to change one's opinions. Now it rather seems to me that all things happen, more often against our will than as the result of it, when the invisible powers behind us decree. For instance, who could have anticipated yesterday that we two should meet to-night at table, or say whether this assembly, brought about by the blizzard, may not be the first scene of either a tragedy or comedy."

I was more at home when Haldane turned the conversation upon practical matters, such as wheat and cattle, than when discussing abstract possibilities; but I afterwards remembered that my fair companion's speech was prophetic, and it struck me that there were dramatic possibilities in the situation as I glanced about me. We were a strangely assorted company, and to one who had spent eight years in the wilderness the surroundings were striking. Tall wax candles in silver standards, flickering a little when the impact of the snow-laden gale shook the lonely dwelling, lighted the table. The rest of the long room was wrapped in shadow save when the blaze from the great open hearth which assisted the stove flung forth its uncertain radiance. The light flashed upon cut glass and polished silver, and forced up the faces of those who sat together against the dusky background.

Carson Haldane, owner of Bonaventure, which he visited occasionally, sat at the head of the table, a clean-shaven, dark-haired man of little more than middle age, whose slightly ascetic appearance concealed a very genial disposition. He was also a man of mark, a daring speculator in mills, and lands, and mines, and supposed to be singularly successful. Why he bought Bonaventure ranch, or what he meant to do with it, nobody seemed to know; but he acted in accordance with the customs of whatever place he found himself in, and because the distinctions of caste and wealth are not greatly recognized upon the prairie there was nothing incongruous in his present company. Sergeant Mackay—lean, bronzed, and saturnine when the humor seized him—now bent his grizzled head with keen gray eyes that twinkled as he chatted to the fresh-faced girl in the simple dress beside him. I knew this was Lucille Haldane, but had hardly glanced at her. Cotton had evidently forgotten that he was a police trooper, and, when he could, broke in with some boyish jest or English story told in a different idiom to that which he generally adopted. He seemed unconscious that he was recklessly betraying himself.

"You must not turn my daughter's head with your reminiscences, Sergeant. She is inclined to be over-romantic already," Haldane said, with a kindly glance at the girl. "Possibly, however, one may excuse her to-night, for you gentlemen live the stories she delights in. By the way, I do not quite understand how you allowed the evildoer to escape, Ormesby."

Being forced to an explanation I described the scene by the river as best I could, looking at the sergeant a trifle defiantly until, at the conclusion, he said: "I cannot compliment ye, Rancher Ormesby."

I was about to retort, when a clear young voice, with a trace of mischief in its tone, asked: "What would you have done had you been there, and why were you so far behind, Sergeant?"

"We do not ride pedigree horses," said Mackay, a trifle grimly. "I should have shot his beast, an' so made sure of him in the first place."

Then there was a sudden silence, when the girl, who turned upon him with a gesture of indignation, said: "It would have been cruel, and I am glad he got away. I saw his face when he passed us, and it was so drawn and haggard that I can hardly forget it; but it was not that of a bad man. What crime had he committed that he should be hunted so pitilessly?"

Young Cotton colored almost guiltily under his tan as the girl's indignant gaze fell upon him, and for the first time I glanced at her with interest. She was by no means to be compared with her sister, but it was a brave young face, slightly flushed with carmine and relieved by bright eyes that shone with pity, I looked upon. In contrast to Beatrice's dark tresses the light of the candles called up bronze-gold gleams from among her hair, and her eyes were hazel, while the voice had a vibration in it that seemed to awaken an answering thrill. Lucille Haldane reminded me of what her sister had been, but there was a difference. Slighter in physique, she was characterized by a suggestion of nervous energy instead of Beatrice's queenly serenity. The latter moved her shoulders almost imperceptibly, but I fancied the movement expressed subdued impatience, and her face a slightly contemptuous apology, while her father laughed a little.

"You must be careful, Sergeant. My younger daughter is Mistress of Bonaventure, and rules us all somewhat autocratically; but, so far as I can gather, your perceptions were tolerably correct in this instance, Lucille," he said. "The man fell into the grip of the usurer, who, as usual, drained his blood; but while what he did may have been ethical justice, he broke the laws of this country, and perhaps hardly deserves your sympathy."

"No?" said Lucille Haldane, and her eyes glistened. "I wish you had not told us what took place at the river, Mr. Ormesby. Here we sit warm and sheltered while that man, who has, perhaps, suffered so much already, wanders, hungry, faint, and bleeding, through this awful cold and snow. Just listen a moment!"

In the brief silence that followed I could hear the windows rattle under the impact of the driving snow and the eerie scream of the blast. I also shivered a little, having more than once barely escaped with my life when caught far from shelter under such conditions, and it was borne in upon me that the outlaw might well be summoned before a higher tribunal than an earthly court by morning.

It was Beatrice Haldane who, with, I noticed, a warning glance at her sister, turned the conversation into a more cheerful channel, and I was well content when some time later she took her place near me beside the hearth, while Lucille opened the piano at her father's request. Possibly neither her voice nor execution might have pleased a critic, though I at least had never heard anything sweeter than the former; but as a break in our monotonous daily drudgery the music enchanted us, and the grizzled sergeant straightened himself very erect, while a steely glint came into his eyes as, perhaps to atone for her speech at dinner, the girl sang with fire and pathos a Jacobite ballad of his own country. Its effect may have been enhanced by the novelty, but there was a power in Lucille Haldane which is only held by the innocent in spirit whose generous enthusiasms are still unblunted, and it seemed to me words and chords rang alternately with a deathless devotion and the clank of the clansmen's steel.

"I cannot thank ye. It was just grand," said Mackay, shaken into unusual eloquence when the girl turned and half-shyly asked if he liked the song, though, as the soft candle light touched it, her face was slightly flushed. "Ye made one see them—the poor lads with the claymores, who came out of the mist with a faith that was not bought with silver to die for their king. Loyal? oh ay! starving, ill-led, unpaid, they were loyal to the death! There's a pattern for ye, Trooper Cotton, who, if ye'll mind what he tells ye, will hold Her Majesty's commission some day when Sergeant Mackay's gone. Ye'll excuse me, Miss Haldane, but the music made me speak."

I noticed that Trooper Cotton seemed to flinch a moment at the mention of a commission, as though it recalled unpleasant memories, and that the worthy sergeant appeared slightly ashamed of his outbreak, while Beatrice Haldane showed a quiet amusement at his Caledonian weakness for improving the occasion. Lucille, however, smiled at him again. "I think that is the prettiest compliment I have ever had paid my poor singing," she said naively. "But I have done my duty. I wonder if you would sing if we asked you, Mr. Cotton?"

"Lucille is at an impressionable age," Beatrice Haldane said to me. "Later she may find much that she now delights in obsolete and old-fashioned. We have grown very materialistic in these modern days."

"God forbid!" I answered. "And I think the sergeant could tell you true stories of modern loyalty."

"For instance?" and I answered doggedly. "You can find instances for yourself if you try to see beneath the surface. There are some very plain men on this prairie who could furnish them, I think. Did you ever hear of Rancher Dane, who stripped himself of all his possessions to advance the career of a now popular singer? She married another man when fame came to her, and it is said he knew she would never be more than a friend to him from the beginning."

"I have;" and the speaker's eyes rested upon me with a faint and yet kindly twinkle in them. "He was a very foolish person, although it is refreshing to hear of such men. Even if disappointment follow consummation, aspiration is good for you. It is more blessed to give than to receive, you know."

Here, to the astonishment of his superior officer, Cotton, who played his own accompaniment, broke into song, and he not only sang passably well, but made a special effort to do his best, I think, while I remember reflecting, as I glanced at the lad in uniform and the rich man's daughter, who sat watching him close by, how strange all this would have seemed to anyone unused to the customs of the prairie. Ours, however, is a new land, wide enough to take in not only the upright and strong of hand, but the broken in spirit and outcast the older country thrusts outside her gates, and, much more often than one might expect, convert them into sturdy citizens. The past history of any man is no concern of ours. He begins on his merits afresh, and by right of bold enterprise or industry meets as an equal whatever substitute for the older world's dignitaries may be found among us. How it is one cannot tell; but the brand of servitude, with the coarseness or cringing it endangers, fades from sight upon the broad prairie.

Beatrice Haldane presently bade me go and talk to her sister, and though I did so somewhat reluctantly, the girl interested me. I do not remember all we said, and probably it would not justify the effort to recall it; but she was pleasantly vivacious of speech, and genuinely interested in the answers to her numerous questions. At length, however, she asked, with a half-nervous laugh: "Did you ever feel, Mr. Ormesby, that somebody you could not see was watching you?"

"No," I answered lightly. "In my case it would not be worth while on their part, you see;" and Lucille Haldane first blushed prettily and then shivered, for no apparent reason.

"It must be a fancy, but I—felt—that somebody was crouching outside there in the snow. Perhaps it is because the thought of that hunted man troubles me still," said she.

"He would never venture near the house, but rather try to find shelter in the depths of the ravine—however, to reassure you. I wonder is it snowing as hard as ever, Sergeant," I said, turning towards Mackay as I concluded.

The casements were double, and sunk in a recess of the thick log walls, over which red curtains were not wholly drawn. I flung one behind my shoulder, and when the heavy folds shut out the light inside could see for some little distance the ghostly glimmer of the snow. Then, returning to my companion, I said quietly: "There is nobody outside, and I should have seen his footprints if there had been."

The two girls withdrew to attend to some household duties presently, and Haldane, who handed a cigar box round, said to me: "Did you do well last season, and what are your ideas concerning prospects down here, Ormesby?"

"I was partly fortunate and partly the reverse," I answered. "As perhaps you heard, I put less into stock and sowed grain largely. It is my opinion that, as has already happened elsewhere, the plough furrows will presently displace many of the unfenced cattle-runs. It is hardly wise to put all one's eggs into the same basket; but my ploughing was not wholly successful, sir."

"It is a long way to Laurentian tide-water, and, assisted by Winnipeg mills, the Manitoba men would beat you," said Haldane, with a shrewd glance at me.

"For the East they certainly would, sir," I answered. "But I see no reason why, if we get the promised railroad, we should not have our own mills; and we lie near the gates of a good market in British Columbia."

Haldane nodded approval, and I was gratified. He was not a practical farmer, but it was said rarely made a mistake concerning the financial aspect of any industrial enterprise.

"You may be right. I wish I had taken in the next ranch when I bought Bonaventure. But, from what I gather, you have extended your operations somewhat rapidly. Is it permissible to ask how you managed in respect to capital?"

The speaker's tone was friendly, and I did not resent the question. "I borrowed on interest, sir; after three good seasons paid off one loan, and, seeing an opportunity, borrowed again. As it happened, I lost a number of my stock, but this year should leave me with much more plough-land broken, and liabilities considerably reduced."

"From a bank?" asked Haldane, and looked a little graver when I answered, "No."

It was, as transpired later, a great pity he spoke again before I told him where I had obtained the money, but fate would have it so.

"I have grown gray at the game you are commencing; but, unless you have a gift for it, it is a dangerous one, and the facilities for obtaining credit are the bane of this country," he said. "I don't wish to check any man's enterprise, but I knew the man who started you, and promised him in his last sickness to keep an eye on you. Take it as an axiom that if you can't get an honest partner you should deal only with the banks. Otherwise the mortgage speculator comes uppermost in the end. He'll carry you over, almost against your wishes, when times are good, but when a few adverse seasons run in succession, take you by the throat when you least expect it. Your neighbors are panic-stricken; nobody with money will look at your property, and the blood-sucker seizes his opportunity."

"But if he sold one up under such circumstances he could not recover his loan, much less charges and interest," I interposed; and Haldane laughed.

"A man of the class I'm describing would not wish to recover in that way. He is not short of money, and knows bad seasons don't last forever, so he sells off your property for, say, half its value, recovers most of what he lent, and still—remember the oppressive interest—holds you fast for the balance. He also puts up a dummy to buy the place in—at depression value—pays a foreman to run it, and when times improve sells the property on which you spent the borrowed money for twice as much."

Haldane nodded to emphasize his remarks as he leaned forward towards me. "The man you were hunting was handled in a similar fashion, and it naturally made him savage. We are neighbors, Ormesby, and if ever you don't quite see your way out of a difficulty you might do worse than consult me."

He moved towards the others when I thanked him, and left me slightly troubled. I knew his offer was genuine, but being obstinately proud, there were reasons why he would be the last man I should care to ask for assistance in a difficulty. That I should ever have anything worth offering Beatrice Haldane appeared at one time a chimerical fancy; but though her father's words left their impression, I had also made some progress along the road to prosperity.

Ever since the brief days I spent in her company in England a vague purpose had been growing into definite shape; but that night I had discovered, with a shock, that if the difference in wealth between us had been lessened she was far removed by experience, as well as culture, from a plain stock-raiser.

III.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

The snow had thinned a little, though it still blew hard, when, before retiring, I borrowed a lantern and made a dash for the stable. The horse which had fallen was a valuable one, and, remembering how stiffly he had moved, I was anxious about the animal. Winter should have been over, and this was its last effort, but the cold struck through me, and I knew by the depth of snow that a horse would be a useless incumbrance to the fugitive, who could not have made a league in any direction. He was probably hiding in the ravine, and it appeared certain would be captured on the morrow. I was therefore the less surprised when the stolen mare shuffled towards me. The man had at least kept his promise to release her when useless, but I was still slightly puzzled as to how the beast had found her own way to Bonaventure. This meant work for me, and I spent some time in the long sod-protected building, which was redolent of peppermint in the prairie hay, before returning to the dwelling. My moccasins made no sound as I came softly through the hall, but it was not my fault that, when I halted to turn out and hang up the lantern, voices reached me through an open door.

"You are in charge here, and will see the lamps and stoves are safe, Lucille," one of them said. "What did you think about our guests?"

"I liked them immensely; the sergeant was simply splendid," answered another voice. "The young trooper was very nice, too. I did not see much of Mr. Ormesby. He talked a good deal to you."

There was no mistaking Beatrice Haldane's rippling laugh. "Rancher Ormesby is amusing for a change. One grows to long for something original after the stereotyped product of the cities. Contact with primitive men and fashions acts, for a time, as a tonic, although too much of it might serve as, say, an emetic."

It was a pity it had not occurred to me to rattle the lantern earlier, for though women do not always mean what they say, this last observation was not particularly gratifying. Neither was it quite what I had expected from Beatrice Haldane. Whether the fair speaker guessed that she had been overheard or not I never knew; but because a ripple of subdued laughter reached me as a door swung to, I surmised that her sister had found cause for merriment. Tired as I was I did not feel immediately disposed for sleep, and, as Haldane had bidden us do just what pleased us best, looked into the troopers' quarters and found Mackay and one of his subordinates, who had preferred to spend the evening with the hired hands, asleep, and Cotton cleaning his carbine.

"We'll be off before daybreak, and I had not a chance earlier. I would not have missed a minute of this evening for promotion to-morrow. Of course, I'll pay for it later; but that's the usual rule, and partly why I'm serving the nation as Trooper Cotton now," he said, with a mirthless smile.

"You are getting as bad as the sergeant," I answered impatiently. "Come along when you have finished if you're not overtired, and we'll smoke one of our host's cigars together. He left the box for us beside the big hearth in the hall."

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Mackay's so confoundedly particular about the arms," said Cotton.

The fire was burning redly in the hall, though the lamps were out, when I ensconced myself in a deep chair behind a deerhide screen quaintly embroidered by Indian women. The cigar was a good one, and I had much to think about, so it was not until a shaft of light streamed athwart the screen that, looking round it, I noticed Lucille Haldane, carrying a candle, had entered the long room. She set it down on a table, and stood still, glancing about her, while I effaced myself behind the screen. The girl had cast her hair loose, and it rippled in glossy masses from her shoulders to the delicate inward curve of waist, setting forth the lithe shapeliness of her figure. Concluding that she would withdraw as soon as satisfied that all was safe, I decided it would be better if she remained unaware of my presence, and hoped that Cotton would delay his coming. To judge by the soft footsteps, she was returning, when a sudden coldness chilled the room. The light grew uncertain, as though the candle flickered in a draught, and a door I had not previously noticed opened noiselessly.

Wondering what this might mean, I sat very still, and then stared blankly as a snow-whitened object came softly into the room. For a few seconds I could almost have fancied it was a supernatural visitant rather than a creature of flesh and blood, for the man's face was ghastly, and he brought the chill of the grave with him. He was bare-headed, his cheeks ashy gray, and clotted brown patches streaked the rag bound round his forehead, while the snow was in his hair; but as he moved forward I had no difficulty in recognizing him. I heard Lucille Haldane draw in her breath with a gasp, and it was that which roused me to action, but the intruder broke the silence first.

"Please don't cry out. You are perfectly safe—and my life is in your hands," he said.

"Not exactly!" I broke in, and, flinging the screen sideways, stepped between him and the girl. The stranger's hand dropped instinctively to the holster at his waist, then he let it fall to his side.

"You here, Rancher Ormesby! I freed your horse, and you have no further cause for hunting me down," he said, with a composure which astonished me. "I am sorry to alarm you, Miss Haldane, but it was the truth I told you. I will not be taken, and it rests with you either to call the troopers or turn me out to freeze in the snow."

In spite of his almost terrifying appearance, it was clear the man was not a ruffian. He spoke with deference, and his voice betrayed consideration for the girl, while again a sense of compassion came upon me. Still, there was my host's daughter to consider, and I turned towards her.

"Will you go away and leave him to me?" I said.

Lucille Haldane, glancing from one of us to the other, shook her head; and I think we must have formed a striking tableau as we stood where the candle light flickered athwart one small portion of the long shadowy room. The girl's face was pale, but a sudden wave of color swept across it when, with a sinuous movement of her neck, she flung back the lustrous masses of her hair. She was dressed as I had last seen her, save the lace collar was missing, and her full white throat gleamed like ivory. Yet, though her voice trembled a little, she showed small sign of fear.

"Will you tell me how you came here?" she asked, and as the question applied to either, we both answered it.

"I have been here some little time, and feared to surprise you; but am very glad it happened so," I said, and the stranger followed me.

"Rancher Ormesby is unjustified in his inference. I came in by the ante-room window. Earlier in the evening I lay outside in the lee of the building watching you, and felt I might risk trusting you, and so waited for an opportunity. I knew the troopers were here, but I was freezing in the snow, and wondered whether, out of charity, you would give me a little food and let me hide in an outbuilding until the blizzard blows over"

Lucille Haldane's fear, if it ever lasted more than a moment, had vanished, and her eyes glistened with womanly pity, for the man's strength was clearly spent; but she drew herself up a little. "What have you done to come to this?" said she.

"I am afraid I should tire you, and somebody might surprise us before I told you half," he answered, logically. "You must take my word that all I did was to resist by force the last effort of an extortioner to complete my ruin. He lent me money, and after I had paid it back nearly twice over tried to seize the little that remained between me and destitution. There was a fracas and he was shot—though the wound was only trifling—in the struggle."

I believed the terse story, and saw that Lucille Haldane did the same. Then I grew anxious lest Cotton should come in before she had made her decision. "There is not a minute to lose. Your father at least should know. Had you not better tell him while I stay here?" I said.

"I don't think so. He has told me that I am mistress at Bonaventure, and I might rouse the troopers in calling him," the girl answered steadily, turning from me to the intruder. "I think I can believe you, and you will find sleigh-robes in the harness-room at the end of the long stable. Slip up the ladder and crawl in among the hay. The sergeant would never suspect your presence there."

"And Rancher Ormesby?" said the other, with a glance at me.

"Will accept the mistress of Bonaventure's decision," I answered drily. "But I am expecting one of the troopers, and you are risking your liberty every second you stay."

"He is starving," said Lucille Haldane. "There is brandy in that sideboard, Mr. Ormesby, and I can find cold food in the kitchen. Ah!——"

I had forgotten, while I strained my ears, that Cotton's moccasins would give no warning as he came down the passage, and hurried forward, at the girl's exclamation, a second too late to bolt the door. He came in before I reached it, and halted, gripping the edge of the table as suddenly as though struck by a bullet, at the sight of the outlaw. He was a lad of spirit, and I saw there was some special cause for his consternation, and that he was also apparently oblivious of the presence of two of the party.

"Good Lord! Is it you, Boone, we have been chasing all day?" he said.

I seized a chair back, and measured the distance between myself and the other man as I noticed the venomous pistol glint in his hand. But he lowered the muzzle when he saw Cotton clearly, and, with a glance in Miss Haldane's direction, let the weapon fall out of sight behind his thigh.

"It is," he answered steadily. "What in heaven's name brought—you—to Canada, Charlie Cotton, and thrust you in my way? It was in a very different character to your present one I last saw you."

Both apparently forgot the spectators in their mutual surprise, though Lucille Haldane stared at them wide-eyed, which was small wonder considering that she was a romantic girl forced for the first time to play a part in what threatened to prove an unpleasantly realistic tragedy. It was hardly possible for her not to guess that these two had been friends under very different circumstances.

Cotton leaned heavily on the table, and, I fancied, groaned; then straightened himself and answered in a strained voice which sounded very bitter: "It would be useless to return the compliment, though the contrast is more marked in your case. I never saw your face, and the name on our warrant suggested nothing. This is her Majesty's uniform, at least—though I would give ten years' pay if it wasn't. Can't you see that I'm Trooper Cotton, and must skulk away a deserter unless I arrest you?"

"There does not seem to be much choice," Boone said grimly. "Heaven knows how little there is to attract any man in the life I have been leading; but there is one good cause why I should not be Quixotic enough to give myself up to oblige you. No! Stand back, Charlie Cotton—I don't want to hurt you."

The pistol barrel glinted as it rose into sight again, and, though no one had spoken in more than a hoarse whisper before, a heavy silence settled upon the room, through which I thought I could hear the girl catch at her breath. I stood between her and the two men, but was at my wits' end as to what should be done. By this time my sympathies were also enlisted on the side of the unfortunate rancher; but the girl's presence complicated the affair. It seemed imperative that she should be safely out of the way before either an alarm was given or a struggle ensued. Yet she had refused to vacate the position, and I realized that she meant it. Meantime, Cotton's face was a study of indecision and disgust. The lad was brave enough, but it seemed as though the mental struggle had partly crippled his physical faculties. With a gesture of dismay he turned suddenly to me.

"It's a horrible combination, Ormesby. Of course, I can't tell anybody all, but I knew this man well, and was indebted to him in the old country. Now he has somehow broken the laws of the Dominion, and I'm bound by my oath of service to arrest him. There is no other course possible. Boone, I can't help it. Will you surrender quietly?"

"No!" was the answer. "My liberty is precious because I have work to do. Move or call out at your peril, Charlie!"

The climax was evidently approaching, and still I could do nothing for fear of jeopardizing Lucille Haldane's safety if I precipitated it. The young lad, unarmed as he was, stiffened himself as for a spring, and I wondered whether I could reach his opponent's pistol arm with the chair leg in time when the trooper moved or shouted. Then, because feminine wits are often quicker than our own, I saw the girl's eyes were fixed upon me, as, unnoticed by the others, she pointed towards the candle. Another second passed before I understood her; then, for the light stood on the corner of the table nearest me, I swept one arm out and there was sudden darkness as I hurled it sideways across the room. The door into the main passage swung to, and Cotton fell over something as he groped his way towards it, while, though strung up in a state of tension, I smiled, hearing—what he did not—somebody brush through the other one, which it was evident had escaped his notice.

Next, feeling that the girl was mistress of the position, I stirred the sinking fire until a faint brightness shone out from the hearth. It just sufficed to reveal Lucille Haldane standing with her back to the door the fugitive had not passed through. This quick-witted manœuvre sufficed to deceive the bewildered representative of the law. "You cannot pass, Trooper Cotton," she said.

The lad positively groaned. "Do you know that you are disgracing me for ever, Miss Haldane?" he said, in a hoarse appeal. "You must let me pass."

The girl resolutely shook her head, and the dying light showed me her slender fingers tightly clenched on the handle of the door. "I will see you do not suffer; but I am mistress of this house, and I think you are an English gentleman, Trooper Cotton," she said.

Then, with an air of desperation, the lad turned to me. "Won't you try to persuade her, Ormesby?"

"No," I said drily. "I am Miss Haldane's guest, and not a police officer. I am sorry for you, Cotton, but you have done your best, and even if you forget your own traditions I'll certainly see you show her due respect. It is not your fault that I have twice your strength, but it will be if, while Miss Haldane remains here, you summon your comrades by a shout."

"Confound you! You never thought——" he broke out; but, ceasing abruptly, left the sentence incomplete; and, feeling that there were two sides to the question, I stood aside while he commenced a circuit of the room, which he might have done earlier. Still, Lucille Haldane did not move, for each moment gained might be valuable, until, with an ejaculation, he discovered and sprang out through the other door. Then, hurrying to her side I laid my hand reassuringly upon the girl's arm and found she was trembling like a leaf as I drew the door open.

"You must not lose a moment, and, I think, should tell your father; but you can trust me to manage Cotton and keep what has passed a secret," I said.

There was a faint "Thank you"; while hardly had she flitted down the passage than a shout rang out, and hurrying as for my life I found Cotton pounding on the inner door of the ante-room. Noticing that the window was shut, I seized him by the shoulder and gripped it hard. "Pull yourself together, and remember that whatever tale you tell, Miss Haldane does not figure in it," I said. "A horse would be no use to him; but I'll make sure by a run to the stable while you acquaint the sergeant."

It was still snowing, and the drifts were deep, but I managed to plunge my feet into the hollows left by somebody who had preceded me, and there was a bottle of brandy in my pocket. I returned, floundering as heavily as possible along my outward tracks—for one learns a good deal when trailing wandering steers or stalking antelope—and met Cotton, who now carried his carbine. It was evident he was bent on discharging his duty thoroughly, for when I announced that no horses were missing, he answered shortly: "Thanks; but I'm going myself to see. Mackay and Mr. Haldane are waiting for you."

I smiled to myself. Trooper Cotton had acquired small proficiency in the art of tracking, and I knew that my footprints would not only deceive him, but that, following them, he would obliterate evidence that might have been conclusive to the sergeant's practised eyes. All the male inmates of Bonaventure had gathered, half-dressed, in the hall, and Sergeant Mackay, who was asking questions, turned upon me. "Ye were here when he came in, Rancher Ormesby?"

"I was," I answered. "I never heard him until he was in the room; but he seemed starving, and presumably ran the risk in the hope of obtaining food."

"Why did ye not seize him or raise the alarm?" asked the sergeant; and I shrugged my shoulders.

"I was wholly unarmed, and he a desperate man with a pistol. You may remember mentioning that his capture was not my business."

"I mind that I have seen ye take as heavy risks when, for a five-dollar wager, ye drove a loaded sledge over the rotten ice," said the sergeant, with a searching glance at me. "While ye did nothing Trooper Cotton came in to help ye?"

"Just so! He had no weapon either, but appeared quite willing to face the outlaw's pistol, when the candle went out, and the man must have slipped out by the second door in the dark. I made for the stables at once, but all the horses were safe. My own, I discovered earlier, had come back of itself."

"Ye showed little sense," said Mackay; while Haldane glanced curiously at me. "What would he do with a horse in two foot of snow? There are points I'm no' clear about; but there'll be time for questions later. Ah! Found ye anything, Trooper Cotton?"

"No," said the lad. "Nothing but the footprints made by Ormesby; and can only presume that, there being no lee on that side, the wind would fill the horse-thief's tracks with snow. He would never risk trying the outbuildings when he knew that we were here."

"No," was the sergeant's answer. "He'll be for the ravine. We'll take our leave, Mr. Haldane, with thanks for your hospitality, leaving the horses in the meantime. It is a regret to me we have brought this disturbance upon ye."

Two minutes later the police had vanished into the snow, and in another ten Bonaventure was almost silent again. I went back to my couch and slept soundly, being too wearied to wonder whether I had done well or ill. Next morning Haldane called me into a room of his own.

"My daughter has told me what took place last night, and while, in one sense, I'm indebted to you, Ormesby, I really can't decide whether you showed a lamentable lack of judgment in abetting her," he said. "She is a brave little soul, but does not always spare time to think. Frankly, I wish this thing had not come about as it did."

He spoke seriously, but there was a kindliness in his eyes, and it was easy to see that Carson Haldane's younger daughter was his idol, which slightly puzzled me. There were those who heaped abuse upon his head, and it is possible his financial operations did not benefit anybody, for when men grow rich by speculation somebody must lose. There are, however, many sides to every nature, and I always found him an upright, kindly gentleman, while only those who knew him best could guess that he was faithful to a memory, and that the gracious influence of one he had lost swayed him still.

"I am sorry if I acted indiscreetly, sir; but could think of no other course at the time," I said. "Do you know where the man is now?"

"It is sometimes unwise to ask questions, and I have not inquired too closely," and Haldane laid his hand upon my shoulder. "It must be our secret, Ormesby, and I should prefer that Miss Haldane did not share it; this—I suppose one must call it an escapade—might trouble her. I presume you could rely upon that lad's discretion. He was evidently not brought up for a police trooper."

"I think you could depend upon him, sir, and, as you know, a good many others follow vocations they were never intended for, in this country."

"Well, we will say no more on that subject," he answered. "The doctors tell me I have been working under too great a strain, and as they recommend quiet and relaxation, I decided to try six months' practical ranching. My partner will no doubt arrange that other folks pay the bill; but this is hardly a peaceful beginning."

Haldane laughed before he added, significantly: "In one respect I'm duly grateful, Ormesby, and—in confidence—here is a proof of it. You are staking high on the future of this region. Well, the railroad will be built, which will naturally make a great difference in the value of adjacent land. You will, however, remember that, in accordance with medical advice, I am now ranching for my health."

I remembered it was said that Carson Haldane could anticipate what the powers at Ottawa would sanction or veto long before anybody else, and that a hint from him was valuable. "It is good news, and I presume Bonaventure will have extended its boundaries by the time you recover, sir," I said.

Sergeant Mackay returned—alone, and very disgusted, bringing no news of the fugitive—that evening, to requisition provisions, and departed again. He did not revisit Bonaventure during the next day I remained there, and presumably the man he sought slipped away when the coast was clear. Perhaps the fact that the whirling drifts would obliterate his tracks had deceived the sergeant, and we supposed the contrabandists who dealt in prohibited liquor had smuggled him across the American frontier. The night before I took my leave Beatrice Haldane looked across at her sister, who sat sewing near the stove, and then at me.

"Since you recovered your horse I am not altogether sorry the hunted man got away," she said. "There are, however, two things about the affair which puzzle me—how the candlestick my sister carried when she made the rounds reached the table in the hall where it is never left; and why I should find the candle it contained under the sideboard in the room the intruder entered! Can you suggest any solution, Mr. Ormesby?"

I felt uncomfortable, knowing that Beatrice Haldane was not only clever herself, but the daughter of a very shrewd man, while her eyes were fixed steadily on me. Lucille's head bent lower over her sewing, and, though I would have given much to answer frankly, I felt that she trusted me. So I said, as indifferently as I could: "There might be several, and the correct one very simple. Somebody must have knocked the candlestick over in their hurry and forgotten about it. Have you been studying detective literature latterly?"

Beatrice Haldane said nothing further; but I realized that I had incurred her displeasure, and was not greatly comforted by the grateful glance her sister flashed at me.

IV.

THE TIGHTENING OF THE NET.

It was a hot morning of early summer when I rode up the low rise to my house at Gaspard's Trail. A few willows straggled behind one side of it, but otherwise it rose unsheltered from the wind-swept plain, which, after a transitory flush of greenness, had grown dusty white again. I had been in the saddle since sunrise, when the dewy freshness had infused cheerfulness and vigor into my blood, but now it was with a feeling of dejection I reined my horse in and sat still, looking about me.

The air was as clear as crystal, so that the birches far off on the western horizon cut sharply against the blue. All round the rest of the circle ran an almost unbroken sweep of white and gray, streaked in one place by the dust of alkali rolling up from a strip of bitter water, which flashed like polished steel. Long plough-furrows stretched across the foreground, but even these had been baked by pitiless sunshine to the same monotony of color, and it was well I had not sown the whole of them, for sparse sickly blades rose in the wake of the harrows where tall wheat should have been. Behind these stood the square log dwelling and straggling outbuildings of logs and sod, all of a depressing ugliness, while two shapeless yellow mounds, blazing under the sunshine, represented the strawpile granaries. There was no touch of verdure in all the picture, for that had been a dry season, which boded ill for me.

Presently a horse and rider, whose uniform was whitened by the fibrous dust, swung out of a shallow ravine—or *coulée,* as we called them—and Trooper Cotton cantered towards me. "Hotter than ever, and I suppose that accounts for your downcast appearance," he said. "I've never seen weather like it, and even the gophers are dead."

"It grows sickening; but you are wrong in one respect," I answered ruefully. "All the gophers in the country have collected round my grain and wells. As they fall in after every hearty meal of wheat we have been drinking them. You are just in time for breakfast, and I'll be glad of your company. One overlooks a good deal when things are going well, but the sordid monotony of these surroundings palls on one now and then."

"You are not the only man who feels it," said the trooper, while a temporary shadow crossed his face. "You have been to Bonaventure too often, Ormesby. Of course, it's delightful to get into touch with things one has almost forgotten, but I don't know that it's wise for a poor man, which is, perhaps, why I allowed Haldane to take me in last night. You, however, hardly come into the same category."

"I shall do, soon, unless there's a change in the weather," I answered, with a frown. "But come in, and tell me what Haldane—or his daughters—said to you."

"I didn't see much of Miss Haldane," said Cotton, as we rode on together. "Of course, she's the embodiment of all a woman of that kind should be; but

I can't help feeling it's a hospitable duty when she talks to me. You see I've forgotten most of the little I used to know, and she is, with all respect, uncomfortably superior to an average individual."

I was not pleased with Trooper Cotton, but did not tell him so. "Presumably you find Miss Lucille understands you better?" I answered, with a trace of ill-humor.

The lad looked straight at me. "I'm not responsible for the weather, Ormesby," he said, a trifle stiffly. "Still, since you have put it so, it's my opinion that Miss Lucille Haldane would understand anybody. She has the gift of making you feel it also. To change the subject, however, I was over warning Bryan about his fireguard furrows, and yours hardly seem in accordance with the order."

I laughed, and said nothing further until a man in a big straw hat appeared in the doorway. "Who's that?" asked Cotton, drawing his bridle.

"Foster Lane," I answered. "He came over yesterday."

"Ah!" said the trooper, pulling out his watch. "On reflection, perhaps I had better not come in. I am due at the Cree reserve by ten, and, as my horse is a little lame don't want to press him. This time you will excuse me."

His excuse was certainly lame, if I could see little the matter with the horse; and, being short of temper that morning, I answered sharply: "I won't press you; but is it a coincidence that you only remember this when you recognize Lane?"

Trooper Cotton, who was frank by nature and a poor diplomatist, looked uneasy. "I don't want to offend you, Ormesby, but one must draw the line somewhere, and I will not sit down with that man," he said. "I know he's your guest, but you would not let me back out gracefully, and, if it's not impertinent, I'm sorry he is."

"I congratulate you on being able to draw lines, but just now cannot afford to be particular myself," I answered drily; and when, with a feeble apology, Cotton rode away, it cost me an effort to greet the other man civilly.

As breakfast was ready he took his place at the table, and glanced at me whimsically. Foster Lane was neither very prepossessing nor distinctly the reverse in appearance. He was stout, and somewhat flabby in face, with straw-colored hair and a thick-lipped mouth; but while his little eyes had a humorous twinkle, there was a suggestion of force about him as well as cunning. He was of middle age, and besides representing a so-styled development company was, by profession, land agent, farmers' financier, and mortgage jobber, and, as naturally follows, a usurer.

"Say, I'm not deaf yet, Ormesby," he commenced, with coarse good humor. "Particular kind of trooper that one, isn't he? Is he another broken-up British baronet's youngest son, or—because they only raise his kind in the old country—what has the fellow done?"

"He's a friend of mine," I answered. "I never inquired of him. Still, I'm sorry you overheard him."

"That's all right," was the answer. "My hide is a pretty thick one; and one needs such a protection in my business. Give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him, Rancher Ormesby, although I flatter myself I'm a necessity in a new country. How many struggling ranchers would go under in a dry season but for my assistance; and how many fertile acres now growing the finest wheat would lie waste but for me? But when I ask enough to live on, in return, every loafer without energy or foresight abuses me. It's a very ungrateful world, Ormesby."

Lane chuckled as he wiped his greasy forehead, and paused before he continued: "I've been thinking all night about carrying over the loan you mentioned, and though money's scarce just now this is my suggestion. I'll let you have three-fourths of its present appraised value on Crane Valley, and you can then clear Gaspard's Trail, and handle a working balance. I'd sooner do that than carry over—see?"

I set down my coffee cup because I did not see. I had expected he would have exacted increased interest on the loan due for repayment, and interest in Western Canada is always very high; but it seemed curious that he should wish to change one mortgage for another. It also struck me that if, in case I failed to make repayment, Crane Valley would be valuable to him, it should be worth at least as much to me.

"That would not suit me," I said.

"No?" and Lane spoke slowly, rather as one asking a question than with a hint of menace. "Feel more like letting me foreclose on you?"

"You could not do that, because I should pay you off," I said. "I could do it, though there's no use denying that it would cripple me just now. As of course you know, whatever I could realize on at present, when everybody is short of money and trade at a standstill, should bring twice as much next season. That is why I wish the loan to run on."

"Well!" and Lane helped himself before he answered. "In that case I'll have to tax you an extra ten per cent. It seems high, but no bank would look at encumbered property or a half-developed place like Crane Valley. Take it, or leave it, at six months' date. That would give you time to sell your fat stock and realize on your harvest."

I fancied there was a covert sneer in the last words, because I had faint hope of any harvest, and answered accordingly. "It seems extortionate, but even so should pay me better than sacrificing now."

"Money's scarce," said Lane suavely. "I'm going on to Lawrence's, and will send you in the papers. Lend me as good a horse as you have for a day or two."

I did not like the man's tone, and the request was too much like an order, but made no further comment, though a load seemed lifted from me when he rode away and I started with my foreman to haul home prairie hay. It was fiercely hot, and thick dust rolled about our light wagon, while each low rise floated, cut off as it were from the bare levels, against the horizon. The glare tired one's vision, and, half-closing my aching eyes, I sank into a reverie. For eight long years I had toiled late and early, taxing the strength of mind and body to the uttermost. I had also prospered, and lured on by a dream, first dreamed in England, grew more ambitious, breaking new land and extending my herds with borrowed capital. That had also paid me until a bad season came, and when both grain and cattle failed Lane became a menace to my prosperity. It was a bare life I and my foreman lived, for every dollar hardly won was entrusted in some shape to the kindly earth again, and no cent wasted on comforts, much less luxuries; but I had seldom time to miss either of them, and it was not until Haldane brought his daughters to Bonaventure that I saw what a man with means and leisure might make of his life. Then came the reaction, and there were days when I grew sick of the drudgery and heavy physical strain; but still, spurred on alternately by hope and fear, relaxed no effort.

Now artificial grasses are seldom sown upon the prairie, and on much of it the natural product grows only a few inches high, while, as building logs are scarce, implements are often kept just where they last were used. It was therefore necessary to seek hay worth cutting in a dried-out sloo (swamp), and next to find the mower, which might lie anywhere within a radius of four miles or so. We came upon them both together, the mower lying on its side red with rust amid a stretch of waist-high grass. The latter was harsh and wiry, heavy-scented with wild peppermint, and made ready for us by the sun.

There were, however, preliminary difficulties, and I had worked myself into a state of exasperation before the rusty machine could be induced to run. After a vigorous hammering and the reckless use of oil the pair of horses were at last just able to haul it, groaning vehemently, through the dried-up swamp. I was stripped by this time almost to the skin, the dust that rose in clouds turned to mire upon my dripping cheeks and about my eyes, while bloodthirsty winged creatures hovered round my head.

"This," said foreman Thorn, as he wiped the red specks from his face and hands, "is going to be a great country, and we can raise the finest insects on the wide earth already. The last time I was down to Traverse a man came along from somewhere with a gospel tent, and from what he said there wasn't much chance for anyone raising cattle. He'd socked it to us tolerable for half-an-hour at least, when Thompson's Charlie gets up and asks him: 'Did you ever break half-thawn sod with oxen?' 'No, my man; but this interruption is unseemly,' says he. 'It's not a conundrum,' says Charlie. 'Did you ever sleep in a mosquito muskeg or cut hay in a dried-out sloo?' and the preacher, seeing we all wanted an answer, shakes his head. 'Then you start in and try, and find out that there are times when a man must talk or bust, before you worry us,' says Charlie. But who's coming along now?"

I had been too busy to pay much attention to the narrative or notice a rattle of wheels, and only looked up when a wagon was drawn up beside the sloo. A smooth-shaven man, with something familiar about his face, sat on the driving-seat smiling down on me.

"Good morning, Rancher Ormesby. Wanting any little pictures of yourself to send home to friends in the old country?" he said, pointing to what looked like the lens of a camera projecting through the canvas behind him. "I'll take you for half-a-dollar, as you are, if you'll leave me the right to sell enlargements as a prairie study."

The accent was hardly what one might have expected from one of the traveling adventurers who at intervals wandered across the country, and I looked at the speaker with a puzzled air. "I have no time to spare for fooling, and don't generally parade half-naked before either the public or my civilized friends," I said.

"Some folks look best that way," answered the other, regarding me critically; whereupon Thorn turned round and grinned. "The team and tall grass would make an effective background. Stand by inside there, Edmond. It's really not a bad model of a bare throat and torso, and as I don't know that your face is the best of you, the profile with a shadow on it would do—just so! Say, I wonder did you know those old canvas over-alls drawn in by the leggings are picturesque and become you? There—I'm much obliged to you."

A faint click roused me from the state of motionless astonishment his sheer impudence produced, and when I strode forward Thorn's grin of amusement changed to one of expectancy. "You don't want any hair-restorer, apparently, though I've some of the best in the Dominion at a dollar the bottle; but I could give you a salve for the complexion," continued the traveler, and I stopped suddenly when about to demand the destruction of the negative or demolish his camera.

"Good heavens, Boone! Is it you; and what is the meaning of this mummery?" I asked, staring at him more amazed than ever.

"Just now I'm called Adams," said the other, holding out his hand. "I hadn't an opportunity of thanking you for your forbearance when we last met at Bonaventure, but I shall not readily forget it. This is not exactly mummery. It provides me with a living, and suits my purpose. I could not resist the temptation of trying to discover whether you recognized me, or if I was playing my part artistically."

"Are you not taking a big risk, and why don't you exploit a safer district?" I asked; and the man smiled as he answered: "I don't think there's a settler hereabouts would betray me even if he guessed my identity, and the troopers never got a good look at me. I live two or three hundred miles east, you see, and the loss of a beard and mustache alter any man's appearance considerably. I have also a little business down this way. Have you seen anything of Foster Lane during the last week or two?"

"Yes," I said. "He has just ridden over from my place to Lawrence's, in Crane Valley."

"You have land there, too," said Boone, as though aware of it already; and when I nodded, added: "Then if you are wise you will see that devil does not get his claws upon it. I presume you are not above taking a hint from me."

I looked straight at him. "I know very little of you except that there is a warrant out for your arrest, and am not addicted to taking advice from strangers."

Boone returned my gaze steadily without resentment, and I had time to take note of him. He was a tall, spare, sinewy man, deeply bronzed like most of us; but now he had, as it were, cast off all pertaining to the traveling pedlar, there was an indefinite something in his speech and manner which could hardly have been acquired upon the prairie. He did not look much over thirty, but his forehead was seamed, and from other signs one might have fancied he was a man with a possibly painful history. Then he flicked the dust off his jean garments with the whip, and laughed a little.

"I am an Englishman, Rancher Ormesby, and, needless to say, so are you. We are not a superfluously civil people, and certain national characteristics betray you. I also fancy we shall be better acquainted, and, that being so, feel prompted to tell you a story which, after what passed at Bonaventure, you have perhaps a right to know. You will stop a while for lunch, any way, and if you have no objections I will take mine along with you."

I could see no reasonable objection to this, and presently we sat together under the wagon for the sake of coolness, while, when the mower ceased its rattle, the dust settled down once more upon the sloo. It was almost too hot to eat; there was no breath of wind, and the glare of the sun-scorched prairie grew blinding.

"I should not wonder if you took most kindly to indirect advice, and there is a moral to this story," said Boone, who called himself Adams, when I lit my pipe. "Some years ago a disappointed man, who knew a little about land and horses, came out from the old country to farm upon the prairie, bringing a woman used hitherto to the smoother side of life with him. He saw it was a good land and took hold with energy, believing the luck had turned at last, while the woman helped him gallantly. For a time all went well with them, but the loneliness and hardship proved too much for the woman, whose strength was of the spirit and not the body, and she commenced to droop and pine. She made no complaint, but her eyes lost their brightness, and she grew worn and thin, while the man grew troubled. She had already given up very much for him. He saw his neighbors prospering on borrowed capital, and, for the times were good, determined to risk sowing a double acreage. That meant comfort instead of privation if all went well, and, toiling late and early, he sowed hope for a brighter future along with the grain. So far it is not an uncommon story."

I nodded, when the speaker, pausing, stared somberly towards the horizon, for since that English visit I also had staked all I hoped for in the future on the chances of the seasons.

"The luck went against him," the narrator continued. "Harvest frost, drought, the summer hail followed in succession, and when the borrowed money melted the man who held the mortgage foreclosed. He was within his rights in this, but he went further, for while there were men in that district who would, out of kindliness, or as a speculation, have bought up the settler's possessions at fair prices, the usurer had also his grasp on them, and when a hint was sent them they did nothing. Therefore the auction was a fraud and robbery, and all was bought up by a confederate for much less than its value. There was enough to pay the loan off—although the interest had almost done so already; but not to meet the iniquitous additions, and the farmer went out ruined on to Government land with a few head of stock, a richer man he had once done a service to gave him; but the woman sickened in the sod hovel he built. There was no doctor within a hundred miles, and the farmer had scarcely a dollar to buy her necessaries. Even then the usurer had not done with him, and entered proceedings to claim the few head of cattle for balance of the twice paid debt. The farmer could not defend himself; somebody took money for wilful perjury to evade a clause of the homestead exemptions, and the usurer got his order. The woman lay very ill when he came with a band of desperadoes to seize the cattle. They threatened violence; a fracas followed, and the farmer's hands were, for once, unsteady on the rifle he did not mean to use, for when a drunken cowboy would have ransacked his dwelling the trigger yielded prematurely, and the usurer was carried off with a bullet through his leg. The woman died, and was buried on a lonely rise of the prairie; and the man rode out with hatred in his heart and a price upon his head. You should know the rest of the story—but the sequel is to follow. It was not without an effort or a motive I told it you."

I stretched out my hand impulsively towards the speaker. "It is appreciated. I need not ask one name, but the other——"

"Is Foster Lane; and in due time he shall pay in full for all."

Boone's voice, which had grown a trifle husky, sank with the last words to a deeper tone, and the sinewy right hand he raised for a moment fell heavily, tight-clenched, upon his knee. He said nothing further for a space, but I felt if ever the day of reckoning came one might be sorry for Foster Lane.

Presently he shrugged his shoulders and rose abruptly. "I have a case of pomade to sell the Swedes over yonder, and if my luck is good some photographs to take," he said, resuming his former manner. "I presume you wouldn't care to decorate your house with tin-framed oleographs of German manufacture. I have a selection, all of the usual ugliness. Whatever happens one must eat, you know. Well, Lane's gone into Crane Valley, and it happens I'm going that way, too. This, I hope, is the beginning of an acquaintance, Ormesby."

He sold Thorn a bottle of some infallible elixir before he climbed into his tented wagon, and left me troubled as he jolted away across the prairie. One thing, however, I was resolved upon, and that was to pay off Foster Lane at the earliest opportunity. By parting with my best stock at a heavy sacrifice it seemed just possible to accomplish it.

V.

A SURPRISE PARTY.

Save when the snow lies deep one has scanty leisure upon the prairie, and when Adams departed Thorn and I hurriedly recommenced our task. We had lost time to make up, and vied with each other, for I had discovered that, even in a country where all work hard much more is done for the master who can work himself. Pitching heavy trusses into a wagon is not child's play at that temperature, but just then the exertion brought relief, and I was almost sorry when Thorn went off with the lurching vehicle, leaving me to the mower and my thoughts. The latter were not over pleasant just then. Still, the machine needed attention, and the horses both restraint and encouragement, for at times they seemed disposed to lie down, and at others, maddened by the insects, inclined to kick the rusty implement into fragments, and I grew hoarse with shouting, while the perspiration dripped from me.

It was towards six o'clock, and the slanting sunrays beat pitilessly into my face, which was thick with fibrous grime, when, with Thorn lagging behind, I tramped stiffly beside the wagon towards my house. My blue shirt was rent in places, the frayed jean jacket, being minus its buttons, refused to meet across it, and nobody new to the prairie would have taken me for the owner of such a homestead as Gaspard's Trail. Thick dust, through which mounted figures flitted, rolled about the dwelling, and a confused bellowing mingled with the human shouts that rose from behind the long outbuildings.

"It's Henderson's boys bringing shipping stock along. Somebody's been squeezing him for money or he wouldn't sell at present," said Thorn, who rejoined me. "They'll camp here to-night and clean up the larder. I guess most everybody knows how Henderson feeds them."

There are disadvantages attached to the prairie custom of free hospitality, and I surmised that Henderson's stock riders might have pushed on to the next homestead if they had not known that we kept a good table at Gaspard's Trail. Nevertheless, I was thankful no stranger need ever leave that homestead hungry, and only wondered whether my cook's comments would be unduly sulphurous. When I reached the wire-fenced corral, which was filled with circling cattle and an intolerable dust, a horseman flung his hand up in salute.

"We're bound for the Indian Spring bottom with an H triangle draft," he said. "The grass is just frizzled on the Blackfoot run, and we figured we'd camp right here with you to-night."

"That's all right; but couldn't you have fetched Carson's by dusk without breaking anybody's neck, and yonder beasts aren't branded triangle H," I said.

The horseman laughed silently in prairie fashion. "Well, we might and we mightn't; but Carson's a close man, and I've no great use for stale flapjacks and glucose drips. No, sir, I'm not greedy, and we'll just let Carson keep them for himself. Those beasts marked dash circle are the best of the lot. Lane's put the screw on Redmond, and forced him to part. Redmond's down on his luck. He's crawling round here somewhere, cussing Lane tremendous."

"Lane seems to own all this country," I answered irritably. "Has he got a hold on your master, too? I told him and Redmond I was saving that strip of sweet prairie for myself."

"He will do, if you bosses don't kick in time," was the dry answer. "I don't know how our own is fixed, but he's mighty short in temper, and you've no monopoly of unrecorded prairie. Say, it might save your boys a journey if we took your stock along with us and gave them a chance before this draft cleans all the sweet grass up. Redmond told me to mention it."

The offer was opportune, and I accepted it; then hurried towards the galvanized iron shed which served as summer quarters for the general utility man who acted as cook. He was a genius at his business, though he had learned it on board a sailing ship, and was using fiery language as he banged his pans about. "It's a nice state of things when a cattle-whacking loafer can walk right in and tell me what he wants for his supper," he commenced. "General Jackson! it's bad enough when a blame cowboy outfit comes down on one like the locusts and cleans everything up, but it's worse just when I'm trying to fix a special high-grade meal."

"I'm not particular. What is good enough for a cowboy is good enough for a rancher any time," I said; and the cook, who was despotic master of his own domain, jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the house. "Guess it mightn't be to-night. Get out, and give me a fair show. You're blocking up the light."

I went on towards the house, wondering what he could mean, but halted on the threshold of our common room, a moment too late. We had worked night and day during spring and early summer, and the sparely furnished room was inches deep in dust. Guns, harness I had no time to mend, and worn-out garments, lay strewn about it, save where, in a futile attempt to restore order, I had hurled a pile of sundries into one corner. Neither was I in exactly a condition suitable for feminine society, and Beatrice Haldane, who had by some means preserved her dainty white dress immaculate, leaned back in an ox-hide chair regarding me with quiet amusement. Her father lounged smoking in the window seat, and it was his younger daughter who, when I was about to retreat, came forward and mischievously greeted me.

"I believe you were ready to run away, Mr. Ormesby, and you really don't seem so pleased to see us as you ought to be," she said. "You know you often asked us to visit you, and so have brought this surprise party on your own head."

"I hope you will not suffer for your rashness, but you see those men out there. They generally leave famine behind them when they come," I said.

The girl nodded. "They are splendid. I have been talking to them, and made one sit still while I drew him. Please don't trouble about supper. I have seen cookie, and he is going to make the very things I like."

Miss Haldane's eyebrows came down just a trifle, and I grew uneasy, wondering if it was the general state of chaos or my own appearance which had displeased her; but Haldane laughed heartily before he broke in: "Lucille is all Canadian. She has not been to Europe yet, and I am not sure that I shall send her. She has examined the whole place already, and decided that you must be a very——"

The girl's lips twitched with suppressed merriment, but she also reddened a little; and I interposed: "A very busy man, was it not? Now you must give me ten minutes to make myself presentable in."

I was glad to escape, and, for reasons, withdrew sideways in crab fashion, while what suspiciously resembled smothered laughter followed me. By good luck, and after upsetting the contents of two bureaus upon the floor, I was able to find garments preserved for an occasional visit to the cities, and flinging the window open hailed a man below to bring me a big pail of water. He returned in ten minutes with a very small one, and the irate cook expostulating behind him, while I feared his comments would be audible all over the building.

"Cook says the well's playing out, and washing's foolishness this weather. The other pail's got dead gophers in it, and Jardine allows he caught cookie fishing more of them out of the water he made the tea with."

"Fling them out, and for heaven's sake let me have the thing. I'm getting used to gophers, and dead ones can't bite you," I said, fearing that if the indignant cook got to close quarters the precious fluid might be spilt. Then while I completed my toilet Cotton came in.

"Perhaps I was hardly civil this morning," he commenced. "I'm out for four days' fire-guard inspecting, and thought I'd come round and tell you——"

"That you saw the Bonaventure wagon heading in this direction," I interposed. "Well, you're always welcome at Gaspard's Trail, and I presume won't feel tempted to draw the line at my present guests."

Cotton dropped into my one sound chair. "I suppose I deserve it, Ormesby. We shall not get such opportunities much longer, and one can't help making the most of them," he said.

We went down together, and there was no doubt that the cook had done his best, while Haldane laughed and his younger daughter looked very demure when, as we sat down at table, I stared about my room. It had lost its bare appearance, the thick dust had gone, and there was an air of comfort about it I had never noticed before.

"You see what a woman's hand can do. Lucille couldn't resist the temptation of straightening things for you," observed the owner of Bonaventure. "She said the place resembled a——"

The girl blushed a little, and shook her head at her father warningly, while, as she did so, her bright hair caught a shaft of light from the window and shimmered like burnished gold. For a moment it struck me that she even equaled her sister in beauty, and was wholly bewitching with the mischief shining in her eyes. There was, however, a depth of kindliness beneath the mischief, and I had seen the winsome face grow proud with a high courage one night when the snows whirled about Bonaventure. Nevertheless, I straightway forgot it when Beatrice Haldane set to work among the tea-cups at the head of the table, for her presence transfigured the room. I had often, as I sat there through the bitter winter nights, pictured her taking a foremost place in some scene of brightness in London or Montreal, but never presiding at my poor table or handling my dilapidated crockery with her dainty fingers. She did it, as she did everything, very graciously, while, to heighten the contrast, the lowing of cattle and the hoarse shouts of those who drove them, mingled with whip-cracks and the groaning of jolting wagons, came in through the open windows.

For a time the meal progressed satisfactorily. Haldane was excellent company, and I had almost forgotten my fears that some untoward accident might happen, when his younger daughter asked: "What is a gopher, Mr. Cotton? I have heard of them, but never saw one."

I projected a foot in his direction under the table, regretting I had discarded my working boots, and Haldane, dropping his fork, looked up sharply.

"A little beast between a rat and a squirrel, which lives in a hole in the ground. There are supposed to be more of them round Gaspard's Trail than anywhere in Canada," answered the trooper, incautiously. "That's quite correct, Ormesby. You cannot contradict me."

I did not answer, but grew uneasy, seeing he could not take a hint; and the girl continued: "Are they fond of swimming?"

"I don't think so," answered Cotton, with a slightly puzzled air; and then added, with an infantile attempt at humor, for which I longed to choke him: "I'm not a natural historian, but Ormesby ought to know. I found him not long ago in a very bad temper fishing dozens of dead ones out of his well. Perhaps they swam too long, and were too tired to climb out, you know."

Lucille Haldane, who had been thirsty, gave a little gasp and laid her hand on the cup Cotton would have passed on for replenishing. Her sister glanced at her with some surprise, and then quietly set down her own, while I grew hot all over and felt savagely satisfied by the way he winced that this time I had got my heel well down on Cotton's toe. Then there was an awkward silence until Haldane, leaning back in his chair, laughed boisterously when the lad, attempting to retrieve one blunder, committed another,

"I am afraid there are a good many at Bonaventure, and it is not Ormesby's fault, you see. It is almost impossible for anybody to keep them out of the wells in dry weather; but nobody minds a few gophers in this country."

Haldane had saved the situation; but his elder daughter filled no more tea-cups, and both my fair guests seemed to lose their appetite, while I was almost glad when the meal I had longed might last all night was over, and Lucille and her father went out to inspect the cattle. I, however, detained Cotton, who was following them with alacrity.

"Your jokes will lead you into trouble some day, and it's a pity you couldn't have displayed your genius in any other direction," I said.

"You need not get so savage over a trifle," he answered apologetically. "I really didn't mean to upset things—it was an inspiration. No man with any taste could be held responsible for his answers when a girl with eyes like hers cross-question him. You really ought to cultivate a better temper, Ormesby."

I let him go, and joined Beatrice Haldane, who had remained behind the rest. She did not seem to care about horses and cattle, and appeared grateful when I found her a snug resting-place beneath the strawpile granary.

"You are to be complimented, since you have realized at least part of your aspirations," she said, as she swept a glance round my possessions. "Is it fair to ask, are you satisfied with—this?"

I followed her eyes with a certain thrill of pride. Wheat land, many of the dusty cattle, broad stretch of prairie, barns, and buildings were mine, and the sinewy statuesque horsemen, who came up across the levels behind further bunches of dappled hide and tossing horns, moved at my bidding. By physical strain and mental anxiety I had steadily extended the boundaries of Gaspard's Trail, and, had I been free from Lane, would in one respect have been almost satisfied. Then I looked up at my companion, whose pale-tinted draperies and queenly head with its clustering dark locks were outlined against the golden straw, and a boldness, as well as great longing, came upon me.

"It is a hard life, but a good one," I said. "There is no slackening of anxiety and little time for rest, but the result is encouraging. When I took hold, with a few hundred pounds capital, Gaspard's Trail was sod-built and its acreage less than half what it is at present; but this is only the beginning, and I am not content. Bad seasons do not last for ever, and in spite of obstacles I hope the extension will continue until it is the largest holding on all this prairie; but even that consummation will only be valuable as the means to an end."

Beatrice Haldane looked down upon me with a perfect composure. "Is it all worth while, and how long have you been so ambitious?" she asked, with a smile, the meaning of which I could not fathom.

"Since a summer spent in England showed me possibilities undreamed of before," I said; and while it is possible that the vibration in my voice betrayed me, the listener's face remained a mask. Beatrice Haldane was already a woman of experience.

"One might envy your singleness of purpose, but there are things which neither success nor dollars can buy," she said. "Probably you have no time to carefully analyze your motives, but it is not always wise to take too much for granted. Even if you secured all you believe prosperity could give you you might be disappointed. Wiser men have found themselves mistaken before, Rancher Ormesby."

"You are right in the first case," I answered. "But in regard to the other, would not the effort be proof enough? Would any man spend the best years of his life striving for what he did not want?"

"Some have spent the whole of it, which was perhaps better than having the longer time for disappointment," answered the girl, with a curious smile. "But are we not drifting, as we have done before, into a profitless discussion of subjects neither of us know much about? Besides, the sun is swinging further west and the glare hurts my eyes, while father and Lucille appear interested yonder."

Beatrice Haldane always expressed herself quietly, but few men would have ventured to disregard her implied wishes, and I took the hint, fearing I had already said too much. Gaspard's Trail was not the finest homestead upon the prairie yet, and the time to speak had not arrived. When we joined Haldane it was a somewhat stirring sight we looked upon. A draft of my own cattle came up towards the coral at a run, mounted men shouting as they cantered upon either flank, while one swinging a whip twice raced at a gallop across the mass of tossing horns when the herd would have wheeled and broken away in a stampede from the fence. The earth vibrated to the beat of hoofs, human yells and a tumultuous bellowing came out of the dust, and I sighed with satisfaction when, cleverly turned by a rider, who would have lost his life had his horse's speed or his own nerve failed him, the beasts surged pell-mell into the enclosure. Much as I regretted to part with them their sale should set me free of debt.

Then the flutter of a white dress caught my eye, and I saw Lucille Haldane, who, it seemed, had already pressed the foreman into her service, applauding when Thorn, cleverly roping a beast, reined in his horse, and, jerking it to a standstill, held it for her inspection. It no doubt pleased him to display his skill, but I saw it was with Thorn as it had been with the sergeant, a privilege to interest the girl. She walked close up to the untamed creature, which, with heaving sides and spume dripping from its nostrils, seemed to glare less angrily at her, while Thorn appeared puzzled as he answered her rapid questions, and Haldane leaned on the rails with a face which was curiously tender as he watched her. Trooper Cotton, coming up, approached Miss Haldane with boyish assurance, and her father turned to me.

"My girl has almost run me off my feet, and now she has taken possession of your foreman I would be content to sit down to a quiet smoke," he said. "Will you walk back to the house with me?"

I could only agree, but stopped on the way to speak to one of the men who had brought in the cattle. He was a struggling rancher, without enterprise or ability, and generally spoken of with semi-contemptuous pity. "I'm obliged to you, Redmond, for suggesting that you would take my draft along; but why didn't you come in and take supper with the rest? This sort of banquet strikes me as the reverse of neighborly," I said.

The man fidgeted as he glanced at the dirty handkerchief containing eatables beside him. "I figured you had quite enough without me, and don't feel in much humor for company just now," he said. "This season has hit me mighty hard."

"Something more than the season has hit him," commented Haldane, as we proceeded. "If ever I saw a weak man badly ashamed of himself that was one. You can't think of any underhand trick he might have played you lately?"

"No," I answered lightly. "He is a harmless creature, and has no possible reason for injuring me."

"Quite sure?" said Haldane, with a glance over his shoulder as we entered the door. "I've seen men of his kind grow venomous when driven into a corner. However, it's cool and free from dust in here. Sit down and try this tobacco."

Haldane was said to be a shrewd judge of his fellow men, but I could see no cause why Redmond should cherish a grudge against me, and knew he had spoken truth when he said the seasons had hit him hardly. It was currently reported that he was heavily in debt, and the stock-rider had suggested that Lane was pressing him. When Haldane had lighted a cigar he took a roll of paper off the table and tossed it across to me, saying, "Is that your work, Ormesby?"

"No. I never saw it before," I answered, when a glance showed me that the paper contained a cleverly drawn map of our vicinity, and Haldane nodded.

"To tell the truth, I hardly expected it was. Some of your recent visitors must have dropped it, and as my daughter found it among the litter during the course of her improvements, and asked whether it should be preserved, I could not well help seeing what it was. Look at the thing again, and tell me what you conclude from it."

"That whoever made it had a good eye for the most valuable locations in this district," I answered, thoughtfully. "He has also shaded with the same tint part of my possessions in Crane Valley."

"Exactly!" and Haldane gazed intently into the blue cigar smoke. "Does it strike you that the man who made the map intended to acquire those locations, and that, considering the possible route of the railway, he showed a commendable judgment?"

"It certainly does so now," I answered; and Haldane favored me with a searching glance. "Then when you discover who it is, keep your eyes on him, and especially beware of giving him any hold on you."

I suspected that Lane had made the map, and it is a pity I did not take Haldane into my full confidence; but misguided pride forbade it, and we smoked in silence until the opportunity was lost, for he rose up, saying: "No peace for the wicked; the girls are returning. Great heavens! I thought the child had broken her neck."

While Thorn went round by the slip-rails a slender, white-robed figure on a big gray horse sailed over the tall fence and came up at a gallop, followed by the startled foreman, towards the house. Haldane, whose unshakable calm was famous in Eastern markets, quivered nervously, and I felt relieved that there had been no accident, for it was a daring leap. Then, while Cotton and her sister followed, Lucille Haldane came in flushed and exultant.

"We have had a delightful time, father, and you must leave me in charge of Bonaventure when you go East," she said. "But where did you get the lady's saddle, Mr. Ormesby?"

"It is not mine," I answered, smiling. "It belongs to my neighbor's sister, Sally Steel. She rode a horse over here for Thorn to doctor."

I regretted the explanation too late. Steel was a good neighbor, but common report stigmatized his sister as a reckless coquette, and I feared that Beatrice Haldane had heard the gossip by the momentary contraction of her forehead. If this were so she, however, showed no other sign of it. When a delicious coolness preceded the dusk it was suggested that Cotton should sing to us, and he did so, fingering an old banjo of mine with no mean skill. I managed to find a place by Beatrice Haldane's side, and when the pale moon came out and the air had the quality of snow-cooled wine, her sister sang in turn to the trooper's accompaniment. I only remember that it was a song free from weak sentimentality, with an heroic undertone; but it stirred me, and a murmur of voices rose up from the shadows outside. Then foreman Thorn stood, broad hat in hand, in the doorway.

"If it wouldn't be a liberty, Miss, the boys would take it as an honor if you would sing that, or something else, over again. They've never heard nothing like it, even down to Winnipeg," he said.

The girl blushed a little, and looked at me. "They were kind to me. Do you really think it would please them?" she asked.

"If it doesn't they will be abominably ungrateful; but although we are not conventional, the request strikes me as a liberty," I said, noticing that her sister did not seem wholly pleased.

"Tell them I will do my best," was the answer, and, after a conference with Cotton, Lucille Haldane walked towards the open door. There was no trace of vanity or self-consciousness in her bearing. It was pure kindliness which prompted her, and when she stood outside the building, with the star-strewn vault above her, and the prairie silver-gray at her feet, bare-headed, slight, and willowy in her thin white dress, it seemed small wonder that the dusty men who clustered about the wire fence swung down their broad hats to do her homage.

Perfect stillness succeeded, save for sounds made by the restless cattle; then the banjo tinkled, and a clear voice rang out through the soft transparency of the summer night: "All day long the reapers!"

There was a deep murmur when the last tinkle of the banjo sank into silence, a confused hum of thanks, and teamster and stock-rider melted away, while Lucille Haldane returning, glanced almost apologetically at me.

"I just felt I had to please them," she said. "Even if you older people smile, I am proud of this great country, and it seems to me these are the men who are making it what it will some day be. Don't you think that we who live idly in the cities owe a good deal to them?"

Haldane laid his hand caressingly on his daughter's arm. "Impulsive as ever—but perhaps you are right," he said. "In any case, it will be after midnight before we get home; and you might ask for our team, Ormesby."

Every man about Gaspard's Trail helped to haul up the wagon and harness the spirited team, while, in spite of Cotton's efforts, Thorn insisted on handing my youngest guest into the vehicle; and it was with some difficulty I exchanged parting civilities with the rest as the vehicle rolled away amidst the stockmen's cheers.

VI.

A HOLOCAUST.

It was late one sultry night when I sat moodily beside an open window in my house at Gaspard's Trail. I had risen before the sun that morning, but though tired with a long day's ride felt restless and ill-disposed to sleep. Thomas Steel, whose homestead stood some leagues away, lounged close by with his unlighted pipe on his knee, and his coarse sun-faded shirt flung open showing his bronzed neck and the paler color of his ample chest. He was about my own age and possessed the frame of a gladiator, but there was limp dejection in his attitude.

"It's just awful weather, but there's a change at hand," he said. "It will be too late for some of us when it comes."

I merely nodded, and glanced out through the window. Thick darkness brooded over the prairie, though at intervals a flicker of sheet lightning blazed along the horizon and called up clumps of straggling birches out of the obscurity. A fitful breeze which eddied about the building set the grasses sighing, but it was without coolness, and laden with the smell of burning. Far off streaks of crimson shone against the sky in token that grass-fires were moving down-wind across the prairie. They would, however, so far as we could see, hurt nobody. Steel fidgeted nervously until I began to wonder what was the matter with him, and when he thrust his chair backwards, said irritably: "For heaven's sake sit still. You look as ill at ease as if you had been told off to murder somebody."

The stalwart farmer's face darkened. "I feel most as bad, and have been waiting all evening to get the trouble out," he said. "Fact is, I'm borrowing money, and if you could let me have a few hundred dollars it would mean salvation."

I laughed harshly to hide my dismay. The prairie settlers stand by one another in time of adversity, and in earlier days Steel had been a good friend to me, but the request was singularly inopportune. Two bad seasons had followed each other, when the whole Dominion labored under a commercial depression, and though my estate was worth at ordinary values a considerable sum it was only by sacrificing my best stock I could raise dollars enough to carry on.

"If I get anything worth mention for the beasts I'll do my utmost, and can by emptying the treasury perhaps scrape up two or three hundred now. What do you want it for?" I said.

"I figured you would," answered the other, with a gasp of relief. "I've been played for the fool I am. I got a nice little book from the —— Company, and it showed how any man with enterprise could get ahead by the aid of borrowed capital. Then its representative—very affable man—came along and talked considerable. I was a bit hard pressed, and the end was he lent me money. There were a blame lot of charges, and the money seemed to melt away, while now, if I don't pay up, he'll foreclose on me."

I clenched my right hand viciously, for the man who had trapped poor Steel had also a hold on me, and I began to cherish a growing fear of the genial Lane.

"It's getting a common story hereabouts," I said. "That man seems bent on absorbing all this country, but if only for that very reason we're bound to help each other to beat him. It will be a hard pull, but, though it all depends upon what the stock fetch, I'll do the best I can."

Steel was profuse, and not over lucid, in his thanks, and I lapsed into a by no means over-pleasant reverie. So some time passed until a glare of red and yellow showed up against the sky where none had been before.

"Looks like a mighty big fire. There's long grass feeding that one, and it has just rolled over a ridge," said Steel. "Seems to me somewhere near the Indian Spring Bottom, but Redmond and the other fellow would drive the stock well clear."

Flinging my chair back I snatched a small compass from a shelf, laid it on the window-ledge, and, kneeling behind it, with a knife blade held across the card took the bearings of the flame. "It's coming right down on the bottom, and though by this time they're probably well clear, I'm a little uneasy about the stock. We'll ride over and make quite sure," I said.

"Of course!" Steel answered, and seemed about to add something, but thought better of it and followed me towards the stable. Thorn, who was prompt of action, had also seen the fire, for he was already busy with the horses, and inside five minutes we were sweeping at a gallop across the prairie. Save for the intermittent play of lightning the darkness was Egyptian and the grass seamed by hollows and deadly badger holes, but the broad blaze streamed higher for a beacon, and, risking a broken neck, I urged on the mettled beast beneath me. Grass fires are common, and generally harmless enough in our country, but that one seemed unusually fierce, and an indefinite dread gained upon me as the miles rolled behind us.

"It's the worst I've seen for several seasons. Whole ridge is blazing," panted Steel, as, with a great crackling, we swept neck and neck together through the tall grass of a sloo in the midst of which Thorn's horse blundered horribly. Then we dipped into a ravine, reeling down the slope and splashing through caked mire where a little water had been. Every moment might be precious, and turning aside for nothing we rode as the crow flies straight across the prairie, while at last I pressed the horse fiercely as a long rise shut out the blaze. Once we gained its crest the actual conflagration would be visible. The horse was white with lather, I was almost blinded with sweat and dust when we gained the summit, and, drawing bridle, I caught at my breath. The Sweetwater ran blood red beneath us, and the whole mile-wide hollow it flowed through was filled with fire, while some distance down stream on the farther side a dusky mass was discernible through the rolling smoke which blew in long wisps in that direction. It seemed as though a cold hand had been suddenly laid upon my heart, for the mass moved, and was evidently composed of close-packed and panic-stricken beasts.

"It's the Gaspard draft held up by the wing fence," a voice behind me rose in a breathless yell.

I smote the horse and we shot down the declivity. How the beast kept its footing I do not know, for there were thickets of wild berries and here and there thin willows to be smashed through, but we went down at a mad gallop, the clods whirling behind us and the wind screaming past, until we plunged into the Sweetwater through a cloud of spray. In places soft mire clogged the sinking hoofs, in others slippery shingle rolled beneath them, while the stream seethed whitely to the girth; but steaming, panting, dripping, we came through, and I dashed, half-blinded, into the smoke. A confused bellowing came out of the drifting wreaths ahead, and there was a mad beat of hoofs behind, but I could see little save the odd shafts of brightness which leapt out of the vapor as I raced towards the fire. Then somebody cried in warning, and the horse reared almost upright as—while I wrenched upon the bridle—a running man staggered out of the smoke. A red blaze tossed suddenly aloft behind him, and as he turned the brightness smote upon his blackened face. It was set and savage, and the hair was singed upon his forehead.

"It's blue ruin. The green birches are burning, and all your beasts are corraled in the fence wings," he gasped. "Fire came over the rise without warning in Redmond's watch. Somehow he got the rest clear, but your lot stampeded and the wire brought them up. I'm off to the shanty for an axe—but no living man could get them out."

Thorn pulled up his plunging horse as the other spoke, and for a few seconds I struggled with the limpness of dismay. Then I said hoarsely: "If the flame hasn't lapped the wings yet we'll try."

By this time the horses were almost in a state of panic, and Thorn's nearly unseated him, but we urged them into the vapor towards the fence. Fences were scarce in our district then, but after a dispute as to the grazing I had shared the cost of that one with another man, partly because it would be useful when sheep washing was forward, or as a corral when we cut out shipping stock. It consisted of only two wings at right angles—one long one towards the summit of the rise, the other parallel to the river, which flowed deep beneath that rotten bank; but the beasts on either side would seldom leave the rich grass in the hollow to wander round the unclosed end, and if driven into the angle two riders could hold the open mouth. Now I could see that the simple contrivance might prove a veritable death-trap to every beast brought up within it.

It was with difficulty we reached the crest of the rise, but we passed the wing before the fire, which now broke through the driving vapor, a wavy wall of crimson, apparently two fathoms high, closing in across the full breadth of the hollow at no great pace, but with a relentless regularity. Then I rode fiercely towards the angle or junction of the wires where the beasts were bunched together as in the pocket of a net. Thorn and Steel came up a few seconds after me.

The outside cattle were circling round and jostling each other, thrusting upon those before them; the inside of the mass was as compact as if rammed together by hydraulic pressure, and to judge by the bellowing those against the fence were being rent by the barbs or slowly crushed to death. Our cattle wander at large across the prairie, and exhibit few characteristics of domestic beasts. Indeed, they are at times almost dangerous to handle, and when stampeded in a panic a squadron of cavalry would hardly turn them. Yet the loss of this draft boded something very like ruin to me, and it was just possible that if we could separate one or two animals from the rest and drive them towards the end of the fence the others might follow. The mouth of the net might remain open a few minutes yet.

"I guess it's hopeless, but we've just got to try," said Thorn, who understood what was in my mind. "Start in with that big one. There's no second to lose."

Steel, leaning down from the saddle, drove his knife-point into the rump of one beast, and when it wheeled I thrust my horse in between it and the herd and smote it with my clenched fist upon the nostrils, uselessly. The terrified creature headed round again, jamming me against its companions, and when my horse backed clear, one of my legs felt as though it was broken. This, however, was no time to trouble about minor injuries or be particular on the score of humanity, and while Thorn endeavored to effect a diversion by twisting one beast's tail I pricked another savagely. It also wheeled when it felt the pain, and when it turned again with gleaming horns and lowered head Steel pushed into the opening recklessly. Then a thick wisp of smoke filled my eyes, and I did not see how it happened, but man and horse had gone down together when the vapor thinned, and the victorious animal was once more adding its weight to the pressure on the rear of the surging mass.

Steel was up next moment, struggling with his horse, which, with bared teeth, was backing away from him at the full length of its bridle; but answering my shout he said, breathlessly: "I don't know if half my bones are cracked or not, but they feel mighty like it. It's no good, Ormesby. We'll have to cut the fence from the other side, and if we fool here any longer we'll lose the horses, too."

I saw there was truth in this, and almost doubted if we could clear the fence wing now. It was, at least, certain that nothing we could do there would extricate the terrified beasts, and when Steel got himself into the saddle we started again at a gallop. There was less smoke, and what there was towered vertically in a lull of the breeze, but the crackling flame tossed higher and higher. For a space I fancied it had also cut us off within the fence, which would have made a dangerous leap, but if the terrified horses were almost beyond guidance fear lent them speed, and with very little room to spare Steel and I shot round the end of the wire.

"Look out for the setting-up post nearest the corner, and slack the turn-screws until the wire goes down, while I try to cut the strand close in to the herd," I roared. "Is Thorn behind you?"

"No," the answer came back. "Good Lord! we've left him inside the fence," and I managed to pull my horse up, when a glance showed me the foreman's stalwart figure silhouetted against crimson flame as he strove to master his plunging horse. It was evident the latter had refused to face the fire, which now rolled almost or right up the wings of the fence.

"Come down and let him go. You can either climb the wires or crawl under them," I shouted, wondering whether the crackling of the flame drowned my husky voice.

"He's worth three hundred dollars, and is either going through or over," the answer came back; and I shouted in warning, for it appeared impossible to clear that fence, though the beast, which was not of common bronco stock, had good imported blood in him. Then there was a yell from the foreman as he shot forward recklessly straight at the fence, for the horse was ready to face anything so long as he could keep the fire behind him, and I held my breath as he rose at the wire. Our horses are not good jumpers, and the result seemed certain. His knees struck the topmost wire, there was a heavy crash, and the man, shooting forward as from a catapult, alighted with a sickening thud, while the poor brute rolled over and lay still on the wrong side of the fence. Thorn rose, but very shakily, and I was thankful I had only lost some three hundred dollars, which I could very badly spare.

"Nothing given out this trip," he spluttered. "I've only dropped my knife. Go on and try the cutting. I'll follow when I can."

In another few moments I dismounted abreast of the angle, and hitched the bridle round a strand of the wire, knowing that the possibility of getting almost instantaneously clear might make all the difference between life and death when my work was done. The fence was tall, built of stout barbed wire strained to a few screw standards and stapled to thick birch posts. I had neither axe nor nippers, only a long-bladed knife, and densely packed beasts were wedging themselves tighter and tighter against the other side of the barrier. Already some had fallen and been trampled out of existence, while others seemed horribly mangled and torn. The man who had gone for an axe had not reappeared, and I regretted I had not bidden him take one of our horses when we met him, for the shanty was some little distance away.

Slashing through the laces I dragged one boot off. Its heel was heavy and might serve as a mallet, and holding the blade upon the top strand close against a post I smote it furiously. The wire was not half-nicked through when it burst beneath the pressure, and a barb on its flying end scored my face so that the blood trickled into my mouth and eyes; but the next was of treble twist, and as I struck and choked I regretted the thoroughness with which we had built that fence. The knife chipped under the blows I rained upon it, and when I shortened the blade its end snapped off. In a fit of desperation I seized the lacerating wires with my naked fingers and tore at them frenziedly, but what the pressure on the other side failed to accomplish the strength of twenty men might not do, so when in a few seconds reason returned to me I picked up what remained of the knife and set to work again. There was still no sign of Thorn, and as the wires did not slacken it was plain that Steel had failed to loose the straining screws without convenient tools. Three slender cords of steel alone pent in the stock that were to set me free of debt, but I had no implements to break them with, and they also held me fast to be dragged down helpless to beggary.

At last the wire I struck at bent outwards further, and when I next brought the boot heel down there was a metallic ringing as one strand parted, and I shouted in breathless triumph, knowing the other must follow. The fire was close behind the pent-up herd now, and I guessed that very shortly my life would depend upon my horse's speed. Just then Steel dashed up mounted, shouting: "Into the saddle with you. The fence is going!"

I saw him unhitch my horse's bridle and struggle to hold the beast ready between himself and me, but meant to make quite certain of my part at least, and brought the boot heel down thrice again. Then I leapt backwards, clutched at the bridle, and scrambled to the saddle as a black mass rolled out of the gap where the wire flew back. I remember desperately endeavoring to head the horse clear of it along the fence, and wondering how many of the cattle would fall over the remaining wires and be crushed before their carcasses formed a causeway for the rest, but the horse was past all guidance, and now the fence had lost its continuity more fathoms of it went down and the dusky mass poured over it. Then something struck me with a heavy shock, the horse stumbled as I slipped my feet out of the stirrups, and we went down together. I saw nothing further, though I could feel the earth tremble beneath me; then this sensation faded, and I was only conscious of a numbing pain beneath my neck and that my left arm caused me agony. After this there followed a space of empty blackness.

When I recovered my faculties in part the pain was less intense, though my left arm, which was tied to my side, felt hot and heavy, and the jolting motion convinced me I lay in the bottom of a wagon.

"Did you get the stock clear?" I gasped, striving to raise my head from the hay truss it was almost buried in, and somebody who stooped down held a bottle to my lips.

"Don't you tell him," a subdued voice said, and the man, who I think was Steel, came near choking me as he poured more spirit than I could swallow down my throat and also down my neck.

"That's all right. Don't worry. We're mighty thankful we got you," he said.

Then the empty blackness closed in on me again, and I lay still wondering whether I was dead and buried, and if so why the pricking between the shoulder and breast should continue so pitilessly, until that ceased in turn, and I had a hazy idea that somebody was carrying me through an interminable cavern, after which there succeeded complete oblivion.

VII.

A BITTER AWAKENING.

The first day on which my attendants would treat me as a rational being was a memorable one to me. It must have been late in the morning when I opened my eyes, for the sun had risen above the level of the open window, and I lay still a space blinking out across the prairie with at first a curious satisfaction. I had cheated death, and been called back out of the darkness to sunlight and life, it seemed. Then I began to remember, and the pain in the arm bound fast to my side helped to remind me that life implied a struggle. Raising my head I noticed that there had been changes made in my room, and a young woman standing by the window frowned at me.

"I guess all men are worrying, but you're about the worst I ever struck, Rancher Ormesby. Just you lie back till I fix you or I'll call the boys in to tie you fast with a girth."

She was a tall, fair, well-favored damsel, with a ruddy countenance and somewhat bold eyes; but I was disappointed when I saw her clearly, even though her laugh was heartsome when I answered humbly: "I will try not to trouble you if you don't mean to starve me."

Miss Sally Steel, for it was my neighbor's sister, shouted to somebody through the window, and then turned to the man who rose from a corner. "You just stop right where you are. When I call cookie I'll see he comes. I've been running this place as it ought to be run, and you won't know Gaspard's when you get about, Rancher Ormesby."

The man laughed, and I saw it was Thorn, though I did not know then that after doing my work and his own by day he had watched the greater part of every night beside me.

"Feeling pretty fit, this morning?" he said.

"Comparatively so," I answered. "I should feel better if I knew just what happened to me and the stock. You might tell me, beginning from the time the fence went down."

"If he does there'll be trouble," broke in Miss Steel, who, I soon discovered, had constituted herself autocratic mistress of Gaspard's Trail. "He must wait until you have had breakfast, anyway." And I saw the cook stroll very leisurely towards the window carrying a tray.

"Was anybody calling?" he commenced, with the exasperating slowness he could at times assume; and then, catching sight of me, would have clambered in over the low window-sill but that the damsel stopped him.

"Anybody calling! I should think there was—and when I want folks they'll come right along," she said. "No. You can stop outside there—isn't all the prairie big enough for you? There'll be some tone about this place before I'm through," and the cook grinned broadly as he caught my eye.

Miss Steel's voice was not unpleasant, though it had a strident ring, and her face was gentle as she raised me on a heap of folded blankets with no great effort, though I was never a very light weight, after which, between my desire to please her and a returning appetite, I made a creditable meal.

"That's a long way better," she said approvingly. "Tom brought a fool doctor over from Calgary, who said you'd got your brain mixed and a concussion of the head. 'Fix his bones up and don't worry about anything else,' I said. 'It would take a steam hammer to make any concussion worth talking of on Rancher Ormesby's head.'"

"Thorn has not answered my question," I interrupted; and Miss Steel flashed a glance at the foreman, who seemed to hesitate before he answered. "It happened this way. You were a trifle late lighting out when you'd cut the fence. Steel said one of the beasts charged you, and after that more of them stampeded right over you. The horse must have kept some of them off, for he was stamped out pretty flat, and it was a relief to hear you growling at something when we got you out."

"How did you get me out?" I asked, and Thorn fidgeted before he answered. "It wasn't worth mention, but between us Steel and I managed to split the rush, and the beasts went by on either side of us."

"At the risk of being stamped flat, too! I might have expected it of you and Steel," I said; and the girl's eyes sparkled as she turned them on the foreman.

"Then Steel went back for the wagon after we found you had an arm and collar-bone broken. I rode in to the railroad and wired for a doctor. Sally came over to nurse you, and a pretty tough time she has had of it. You had fever mighty bad."

"There's no use saying I'm obliged to both of you, because you know it well," I made shift to answer; and Sally Steel stroked the hair back from my forehead in sisterly fashion as she smiled at Thorn. "But what about the stock? Did they all get through?"

Thorn's honest face clouded, and Sally Steel laid her plump hand on my mouth. "You're not going to worry about that. A herd of cattle stampeded over you and you're alive yet. Isn't that good enough for you?"

I moved my head aside. "I shall worry until I know the truth. All the beasts could not have got out. How many did?" I said.

Thorn looked at Sally, then sideways at me, and I held my breath until the girl said softly: "You had better tell him."

"Very few," said the foreman; and I hoped my face was as expressionless as I tried to make it when I heard the count. "Some of those near the fence got clear, and some didn't. Steel had grubbed up a post, and when the wires slacked part of the rest got tangled up and went down, choking the gap. It was worse than a Chicago slaughter-house when the fire rolled up."

"The horses, too? How long have I been ill, and has any rain fallen?" I asked, with the strange steadiness that sometimes follows a crushing blow, and Thorn moodily shook his head.

"Both horses done for. 'Bout two weeks, I think. None worth mention—and the crop is clean wiped out."

There was silence for some minutes, and Sally Steel patted my uninjured shoulder sympathetically. Then I pointed to a litter of papers on the table, and inquired if there were any letters in Lane's writing.

Thorn handed me one, reluctantly, and it was hard to refrain from fierce exclamation as I read the laconic missive. Lane regretted to hear of my accident, but the scarcity of money rendered it necessary to advise me that as I had not formally accepted his terms repayment of the loan was overdue, and he would be obliged to realize unless I were willing to pledge Crane Valley or renew the arrangement at an extra five per cent. on the terms last mentioned.

"Bad news!" said Sally. "Then I guess Thorn sha'n't worry you any more; but it's just when things look worst the turn comes. That team will be bolting soon, Thorn. I'll sit right back in the corner, and until you want to talk to me you can forget I'm there."

The high-pitched voice sank to a gentler tone, and I felt grateful to Sally Steel. Her reckless vagaries often formed a theme for laughter when the inhabitants of the prairie foregathered at settlement or store, but there was a depth of good nature as well as an over-daring love of mischief in her, and not infrequently a blessing accompanied the jest. Thorn was moving towards the door when, recollecting another point, I beckoned him.

"How was it that when they had, or should have had, time enough, Henderson's man and Redmond did not stop the cattle bunching in the fence? It's very unlike our ways if they made no effort to save my beasts as well as their own masters' property," I said.

Foreman Thorn looked troubled, and I saw that Sally was watching him keenly. "I don't understand it rightly, and I guess no man ever will," he said. "Of course, we struck Henderson's Jo with just that question, and this is what he made of it. He and Redmond were camping in Torkill's deserted sod-house, and when they saw the fires were bad that night Redmond said he'd ride round the cattle. Their own lot were pretty well out of harm's way east of the fence, but Jo told him to take a look at yours. Redmond started, and, as he knew he'd call him if he was wanted, Jo went off to sleep."

"That does not explain much," I interjected, when Thorn halted, rubbing his head as though in search of inspiration.

"There isn't an explanation. Jo—he woke up later—saw the fire coming right down the hollow, and started on foot for the fence. There was no sign of Redmond anywhere. Jo couldn't get the stock out, and he couldn't cut the fence, and was going back for an axe when we met him. You know all the rest—'cept this. Steel and I were standing over you, and the fire was roasting the beasts mixed up in the fence, when Redmond comes along. The way he stood, the flame shone right on his face. It seemed twisted, and the man looked like a ghost. He stood there blinking at the beasts—and it wasn't a pretty sight—then shook all over as he stooped down and looked at you. There was a good deal of blood about you from the horse.

" 'What the devil's wrong with you? Stiffen yourself up,' says Steel; and Redmond's voice cracked in the middle as he answered him: 'I'm feeling mighty sick. Is he dead?'

" 'Looks pretty near it. If you'd seen those beasts clear he mightn't have come to this. Here, take a drink. We'll want you presently,' says Steel, and went on strapping you together with a girth and bridle, while I watched Redmond with one eye. As you know, there was never much grit in the creature, and he had another shivering fit.

" 'Get out until you're feeling better. That kind of thing's catching, and we've lots to do," I said; and he laughs with a cackle like an hysterical woman, and blinks straight past me. Steel and I figured he'd got hold of some smuggled whisky and been drinking bad, but afterwards Henderson's Jo said no.

" 'It's murder. My God! It's horrible—an' he never done anyone no harm,' he says, and falls to cussing somebody quietly. I can talk pretty straight when I'm hot myself, but that was ice-cold swearing with venom in it, and when he got on to Judas, with the devil in his eyes, I ripped up a big sod and plugged him with it on the head.

" 'If you don't let up or quit I'll pound the life out of you,' says Steel.

"Well, we got you fixed so you couldn't make the damage worse, and when Steel went for the wagon and I looked round for Redmond he was gone. Don't know what to think of it, any way, 'cept his troubles or bad whisky had turned his head. You see he was never that far from crazy."

"Why didn't one of you get hold of him and make him talk next day?" I asked; and Thorn looked at me curiously.

"Because he'd gone. Lit out to nobody knows where and stopped there. I don't know just what to think myself."

Sally took Thorn by the shoulders and thrust him out, but he left me with sufficient, and unpleasant, food for reflection. The stock I had counted on were gone. Also, when it was above all things desirable that I should be up and doing, I must lie still for weeks, useless as a log. One thing at least I saw clearly, and that was the usurer's purpose to absorb my property; and as I lay with throbbing forehead and fingers, which had grown strangely white, tight-clenched, determined he should have cause to remember the struggle before he accomplished it. That Redmond had been driven by him into shameful treachery appeared too probable, though there was no definite proof of it, and the thought stiffened my resolution. My scattered neighbors, patient as they were, were ill to coerce and would doubtless join me in an effort before the schemer's machinations left us homeless.

Then I could hardly check a groan as I remembered all that the brief glimpses of a brighter life at Bonaventure had suggested. A few months earlier it had appeared possible that with one or two more good seasons I might even have attained to it; but since then a gulf had opened between Beatrice Haldane and me, and the best I could hope for was a resumption of what now seemed hopeless drudgery. It was a bitter awakening, and I almost regretted that Steel and foreman Thorn had not been a few seconds later when the fence went down. An hour passed, and Sally Steel, carrying a chair over to my side, offered to read what she said was a real smart shadowing story to me. I glanced at the invincible detective standing amidst a scene of bloodshed, depicted on the cover of the journal she held up, and declined with due civility.

"I am afraid my nerves are not good enough. I would sooner you talked to me, Sally," I said.

She laughed coquettishly, and there was no doubt that Steel's sister was a handsome damsel, as women on that part of the prairie go. Sun and wind had ripened the color in her face, her teeth were white as ivory, her lips full and red, and perhaps most men would have found pleasure in watching the sparkle of mischief that danced in her eyes as she answered demurely: "That would be just too nice. What shall we talk about?"

"You might tell me who came to ask for me first," I said.

The girl stretched out one plump arm with a comprehensive gesture. "They all came, bringing things along, most of them. Even the little Icelander, he loaded up his wagon with a keg of herrings—said they were best raw—and lumps of grindstone bread. Oh, yes, they all came, and I was glad to see them, 'cept when some of their wives came with them."

"They are kind folks in this country; but how could the women worry you? In any case, I think you would be equal to them," I commented; and, somewhat to my surprise, the girl first blushed and then looked positively wicked.

"They—well, they would ask questions, and said things when they found Tom was down to Brandon," she answered, enigmatically. "Still, I guess I was equal to most of them. 'Rancher Ormesby's not sending the hat round yet, and that truck is not fit for any sick man to eat when it's just about half-cooked,' I said. 'You can either take it back or leave it for Thorn to worry with. Fresh rocks wouldn't hurt his digestion. Just now I'm way too busy to answer conundrums.'"

Sally seemed glad to abandon that topic, and did not look quite pleased when I hazarded another question with suppressed interest, but as carelessly as I could: "Did anybody else drive over?"

The girl laughed a trifle maliciously, and yet with a certain enjoyment. "Oh, yes. One day when I was too busy for anything the folks from Bonaventure drove over, and wanted to take you back. I don't know why, but the way Haldane's eldest daughter looked about the place just got my back up. 'You can't have him. This is where he belongs to,' I said.

" 'But he is ill, and this place is hardly fit for him. There are no comforts, and we could take better care of him,' said the younger one, and I turned round on her.

" 'That's just where you're wrong. Rancher Ormesby has lived here for eight years, and when he's sick has plenty friends of his own kind to take care of him. I'm one of them, and we don't dump our sick folk on to strangers,' I said.

"The elder one she straightens herself a little as though she didn't like my talk. 'He could not be so comfortable as he would be at Bonaventure, which is the most important thing. We will ask the doctor; and have you any right to place obstacles in the way of Mr. Ormesby's recovery?' says she, and that was enough for me.

" 'I've all the right I want,' I answered. 'I'm running Gaspard's Trail, and if you can find a man about the place who won't jump when I want him, you needn't believe me. That makes me a busy woman—see?—so I'll not keep you. Go back to Bonaventure, and don't come worrying the folks he belongs to about Rancher Ormesby.' "

I groaned inwardly, and only by an effort concealed my blank consternation. "What did they say next?" I asked.

"Nothing much. The youngest one—and I was half sorry I'd spoken straight to her—opened her eyes wide. The elder one she looks at me in a way that made me feel fit to choke her, while Haldane made a little bow. 'I have no doubt he is in capable hands, and we need not trouble you any further. No. I don't think you need mention that we called,' says he."

Sally tossed her head with an air of triumph as she concluded, and I lay very still, for it was too late to pray for deliverance from my friends, though of all the rude succession this was about the most cruel blow. What mischievous fiend had prompted the quick-tempered girl to turn upon the Haldanes I could never surmise, but jealousy might have had something to do with it, for Trooper Cotton had once been a favorite of hers. In any case, the result appeared disastrous, for, while I believed her no more than thoughtless, and had, indeed, once broken a hayfork upon an indiscreet harvester who suggested something else, there was no disguising the fact that some of the settlers' less favored daughters spoke evil of Sally Steel, and I feared their stories had reached Bonaventure.

When five minutes or so had passed she looked at me somewhat shyly. "You're not mad?" she said.

"I could hardly be vexed with you, whatever happened, after all you have done for me. I was only thinking," I made shift to answer. "Still, you might have been a little more civil, Sally."

For a moment or two the girl appeared almost penitent; then she bent her head towards my own, and again the mischief crept into her eyes.

"I'd have brought them in to a banquet, if I had only guessed," she said; and with a trill of laughter slipped out of the room, while it was with sincere relief I saw her go, for I was in no mood for the somewhat pointed prairie banter, and felt that, in spite of her manifold kindnesses, I could almost have shaken Sally Steel. Then I turned my head from the light, remembering I was not only a ruined man without even power to move, but had left a discordant memory with the friends whose good opinion I most valued, and might now never meet on the old terms again.

VIII.

HOW REDMOND CAME HOME.

The weather continued pitilessly hot and dry, when, one afternoon, Trooper Cotton, returning from a tour of fireguard inspection, sat near the window-seat I lay in at Gaspard's Trail. I was glad of his company because the sight of the parched prairie and bare strip of plough-land was depressing. Barns and granary alike were empty, for the earth had failed to redeem her promise that season, and an unnatural silence brooded over Gaspard's Trail.

"I don't know what has come over this country," the trooper said. "One used to get a cheery word everywhere, but now farmer and stockman can hardly answer a question civilly, and the last fellow I spoke to about his fireguards seemed inclined to assault me. Presumably it's the bad times, and I'll be thankful when they improve. It might put some of you into a more pleasant humor."

"If you had said bad men you might have been nearer the mark," I answered drily. "We are a peaceable people, but there's an oppression worse than any governmental tyranny, and from the rumors in the air it's not impossible some of us may try to find our own remedy if we are pushed too far."

"That's a little indefinite," said Cotton, with a laugh. "If you mean taking the law into your own hands there would be very unpleasant work for me. Still, I'm sorry for all of you, especially those that flabby scoundrel Lane seems to be squeezing. He's been driving to and from the railroad a good deal of late, and it's curious that twice when I struck his trail a pair of traveling photographers turned up soon after him. One was a most amusing rascal, but I did not see the other, who was busy inside the wagon tent and apparently managed the camera. I'll show you a really tolerable picture of me he insisted on taking."

It struck me that Boone, or Adams, had twice run a serious risk; but I said nothing, and Cotton, fumbling inside his tunic, tossed a litter of papers upon the table. These were mostly official, but there were odd letters among them, for the trooper was not remarkable for preciseness, and I noticed a crest upon some of the envelopes, while, after shuffling them, he flung me a small card, back uppermost. I was surprised when, turning it over, the face of Lucille Haldane met my gaze.

"It is a charming picture; but that is only natural, considering the original. How did you get this, Cotton?" I said.

The trooper snatched it from me, and a darker color mantled to his forehead. "Confound it! I never meant to show you that," he said.

"So I surmised," I answered drily; and the lad frowned as he thrust the picture out of sight.

"You will understand, Ormesby, that Miss Haldane did not give me this. I—well—discovered it."

"Wasn't it foolish of you?" I said quietly; and the trooper, who, strange to say, did not seem to find my tone of paternal admonition ludicrous, answered impulsively: "I don't know why I should strip for your inspection, Ormesby, or why I should not favor you with a well-known reply; but it is perhaps best that you should not misunderstand the position. I know what you are thinking, but haven't forgotten I'm Trooper Cotton—nor am likely to. It's a strange life, Ormesby, and the men who live it go under occasionally. This—God bless her—is merely something to hold on by."

I made no answer, for there was nothing appropriate I could find to say; but it occurred to me that Lucille Haldane might never receive a higher compliment than this lad's unexpectant homage.

"Here is the right one, and you will obliterate the other from your memory," he said, passing me a second photograph. "The fellow who took it knows how to handle a camera."

It was evident he did; and, knowing who he was, the irony of the circumstances impressed me as I examined the picture. "He has an artistic taste and an eye for an effective pose. Are you going to send any copies to your folks in England, Cotton?" I said.

"No," said the lad quietly; "they might not be pleased with it. Well, I daresay you have guessed that I am one of the legion long ago. My folks were most of them soldiers, which was why, when I had two dollars left me, I offered the nation my services at Regina; but I am the first of them to wear a police private's uniform."

I nodded sympathetically, and the trooper, who looked away from me out of the window, said: "Talk of the devil! All men, it is said, are equal in this country, but I fancy there's a grade between most of us and your acquaintance Foster Lane. The fellow has passed the corral, and I can't get out without meeting him."

I nodded with a certain grim sense of anticipation, for I had determined to speak very plainly to Foster Lane, and knew Cotton could, on occasion, display a refined insolence that was signally exasperating. Next moment Lane came in, red-faced and perspiring, and greeted me with his usual affability.

"I'm on the way to recovery, but unable to ride far, which explains my request for a visit," I said; and Lane waved his large hands deprecatingly.

"Business is business, and you need not apologize, because if I have come two hundred miles you will find first-class expenses charged for in the bill. I can't smoke on horseback. Will you and the trooper try one of these?"

"No, thanks!" said Cotton, with an inflection in his voice, and a look in his half-closed eyes that would have warned a more sensitive person; but Lane, still holding out the cigar-case, repeated with mild surprise: "By the price I paid for them they ought to be good."

"I don't doubt it," drawled Cotton, glancing languidly at the speaker. "But a few of what you would call British prejudices still cling to me, and I only take cigars and things from my friends—you see?"

The stout man laughed a little, though there was malice in his eye. "And we are not likely to be acquainted? You are, one might presume, a scion of the English aristocracy, come out to recruit your health or wait until it's a little less sultry in the old country."

"I would hardly go so far!"—and Cotton drawled out the words, as he turned upon his heel. "More unlikely things have happened. At present I have the honor of serving Her Majesty as—a police trooper."

Lane handed me his cigar-case when the lad strolled out of the door, but I was in no mood to assume an unfelt cordiality. "I am not inclined for smoking. Hadn't we better come straight to business?" I said.

Lane struck a match, and stretched his legs along the window-seat, though he closed the case with a snap. "Why, certainly! You are ready to redeem the mortgage on Gaspard's Trail?"

He spoke pleasantly, though there was a sneer in his eyes, and he had both lighted his cigar, in spite of my hint, and laid his dusty boots on the cushions with a cool assurance which made me long to personally chastise him. "You probably know that I am not," I said.

"I did hear you had lost some cattle," he answered indifferently. "Well, in that case I wait your proposition."

"I am open to renew the loan at the original interest until this time next year, when, whatever I have to part with, it will be paid off. You have had a very fair return on your money already," I said.

"It can't be done," and Lane looked at his cigar thoughtfully. "I'll carry you on that long at double interest, or make you a bid right out for Crane Valley."

"There is no reason in your first offer, and you only asked fifty per cent. increase last time, which was enough in all conscience. What do you want Crane Valley for?"

Lane smiled benignly. "You didn't accept that offer formally. Crane Valley's a pretty location, and I've taken a fancy to it."

I took time to answer, and set my brain to work. The advantage lay with the enemy, but, while it appeared certain that he would dispossess me of Gaspard's Trail, I determined to hold on to Crane Valley. "You can't have it, and I will not pay the extortionate interest. That, I think, is plain enough," I said.

The financier shrugged his shoulders. "I hope you won't be sorry. I haven't quite decided on my programme, but you will hear what it is when I'm ready. Have you got your own fixed up?"

"I will have soon," I answered, my indignation gaining the mastery. "There is no advantage to be gained by further circumlocution, and you may as well know that I will give you as much trouble as possible before you plunder me. In the first place, if we find Redmond I shall try to strike you for conspiracy."

"Do you know where Redmond is?" and there was a curious note in the speaker's voice, though I stolidly refrained from any sign of either negation or assent. "Neither do I; but I have my suspicions that he won't be much use to you if you do find him. The man is half-crazy, any way. Did you ever hear about the fool bull-frog and the ox, Rancher Ormesby?"

He leaned back against the logs, and chuckled so complacently at his own conceit that it was hard to believe this easy-tempered creature was draining half my neighbors' blood; but I was filled with a great loathing of him.

"Your simile isn't a good one, even if it fits the case. An ox is a hard-working, honest, and useful kind of beast, but there's no use bandying words," I said.

"Just so!" and Lane rose lazily. "It's rather a pity you sent for me, because you have not had much for your money. Being rather pressed just now I won't stay."

I had no intention of requesting him to do so, for the air seemed clearer without him, and presently Cotton returned. For the first time I told him all my suspicions concerning Redmond, and he looked grave as he listened. "It would have saved some folks sorrow if I could only have run that horse-leech in," he commented, gazing regretfully after the diminishing figure of the rider. "Yes; it's curious about Redmond. Lane was over at his place some little time before your accident, and I believe afterwards as well, while since then nobody has seen Redmond. I'll have a talk with Mackay, and put some of our men on his trail. If he's still on top of the prairie they'll find him."

Cotton also rode away, and late that evening Steel returned from his own holding with a very grim face, while the eyes of his sister were suspiciously red.

"I'm to be sold up, and am turned out now," he said. "Lane, who won't wait any longer, is foreclosing, and he'll fix things so there will be no balance left. God knows what's to become of Sally and me."

"You need not trouble about Sally," the girl said, with a flash in her eyes. "We'll worry along somehow, and live to see that devil sorry."

Practical counsel seemed the best sympathy, and after asking a few questions, I said: "This is going to be a grain-producing country, and there are plenty acres ready for breaking and horses idle at Crane Valley. When Lane seizes Gaspard's Trail, as he probably will, we must see what can be done with them on a share arrangement; and meantime, since I paid two hired men off, there is plenty for you to do here helping me."

Steel eventually agreed, and as soon as I was fit for the saddle I rode over to Mackay's quarters, but though he stated that if Redmond were anywhere in the Territories he would sooner or later be found, nothing had so far resulted from his inquiries. It was some weeks later, and towards the close of a sultry afternoon, when I rode homewards with Cotton and Steel towards the Sweetwater. We had much thunder that season, and though there had been a heavy storm the night before, a stagnant, oppressive atmosphere still hung over the prairie. It suited the somber mood of two of the party, while even Cotton seemed unusually subdued.

Steel's possessions had been sold off that day, and bought up at ridiculously inadequate prices by two strangers, who we all suspected had been financed by Lane. Few of us had a dollar to spare, and the auctioneer, who was also probably under the money-lender's thumb, demanded proof of ability to make the purchase when one or two neighbors attempted to force up the bidding. Steel rode with slack bridle and his head bent, and I was heavy of heart, for I only held Gaspard's Trail on sufferance, and the same fate must soon overtake me. The prairie stretched before us a desolate waste, fading on either horizon into gray obscurity, and together with the gloom of the heavens above its forlorn aspect increased my depression. So we came moodily to the dip to the Sweetwater, and I saw Mackay standing beside a deeper pool below. A rapid flowed into the head of it, and the lines of froth shone with a strange lividness. The time was then perhaps an hour before sunset.

Mackay turned sharply when we dismounted to water and rest the horses, and glanced at Cotton.

"All went off quietly?" And the trooper nodded.

"Yes," I said. "We have a long patience, Sergeant; but there were signs on some of the faces that things may go differently some day."

"Ay?" said the sergeant, fixing his keen eyes upon me as he stood, a lean, bronze-skinned statue beside the river. "What were ye meaning, Rancher Ormesby?"

"I was merely giving you a hint," I said. "We have paid all demanded from us and kept the law, but now, when the powers that rule us stand by and watch us ground out of existence to enrich a few unprincipled schemers it is hard to say what might not happen."

"Ye did well," was the dry answer. "It will be my business to see ye keep it still; but in this country any man has liberty to talk as foolishly as it pleases him. Can the law change the seasons for ye, or protect the careless from their own improvidence? But let be. I'm older than most o' ye, and have seen that there's a measure set on oppression."

He concluded with a curious assurance which approached solemnity; but Steel added, with a Western expletive, that he had let be until he was ruined already. Then I broke in: "If I can find Redmond and wring the truth from him I hope to prove that limit has been reached; and purpose, in the first place, to see what the law will do for me. Have you any word of him?"

"No," and the sergeant's tone was very significant. "If he was still above the prairie-sod we would have found him. But there was a bit freshet last night—and I am expecting him."

Steel, I fancied, shivered, and though the speaker might well be mistaken, anything that served to divert our thoughts was a relief, and we lay for a space among the grasses smoking silently. The sky was heavily overcast, there was no breath of air astir, and the slow gurgle of the river drifted mournfully down the hollow. For some reason I also felt strangely restless and expectant, as though something unusual would shortly happen. A faint drumming of hoofs rose up from somewhere far off across the prairie, as well as a sound which might have been made by an approaching wagon.

"That's Lane striking south for the railroad with a few of the boys behind him," Steel said listlessly. "There'll be thunder before he reaches it, and Lardeau's team is wild, but there's no use hoping they'll bolt and break Lane's neck for him. Accidents do not happen to that kind of man."

A little time had passed, and the beat of horses' feet broke in a rhythmic measure through the heavy stillness, when Cotton, who had followed his sergeant along the bank, raised a shout, and I leaped to my feet, for something that circled with the current was drifting down stream. We ran our hardest, but, for I was not strong yet, the others were standing very silent with tense faces and staring eyes when I rejoined them.

"Yon's Redmond," said Sergeant Mackay. "I was expecting him."

The object he pointed to slid slowly by abreast of us, and I felt a shock of physical nausea as I stared at it. At that distance it was without human semblance, a mere shapeless mass of sodden clothing save for the faint white glimmer of a face; but the shock gave place to a fit of sullen fury. Heaven knows I cherished no anger against the unfortunate man. Indeed, I had regarded him as a mere helpless tool from the beginning; but death had robbed me of my only weapon, and I remembered Lane's prediction that Redmond would be of little use to me if I found him.

"If one of ye have a lariat ye had better bring it," said Sergeant Mackay.

We followed the object down stream, and it floated slowly, now half-submerged, now rising more buoyantly with the blanched countenance turned towards the murky heavens, out of which the light was fading, until Steel, poising himself upon the bank, deftly flung a coupled lariat. The noose upon its end took hold, and I shrank backwards when we drew what it held ashore, for Redmond's face was ill to look upon, and seemed to mock me with its staring eyes.

"Stan' clear!" said the sergeant, perhaps feeling speech of any kind would be a relief, for nobody showed the least desire to crowd upon him. "If it had not been for the regulations a drop whisky would have been acceptable, seeing that it's my painful duty to find out how he came by his end."

The words were excusable, but there was no whisky forthcoming; and though, perhaps, only one man in a hundred would have undertaken that gruesome task, the sergeant went through it with the grim thoroughness which characterized all his actions.

"There's no sign of a blow or bullet that I can find, and I'm thinking only the Almighty knows whether he drowned himself or it was accidental death. Ye can identify him, all of ye?"

We thought we could, but had been so intent that nobody noticed the trampling of horses' hoofs until a wagon was drawn up close by, and several riders reined in their beasts.

"Here's a man who ought to," said Steel. "Come down and swear to your partner, Lane."

Turning, I saw my enemy start as he looked over the side of the wagon at what lay before him. Every eye was fixed upon him, and Steel stood quietly determined by the wheel.

"I'm in a hurry, and don't fill the post of coroner," the former said.

"Will you come down?" Steel added; and there was a low growl from the assembly, while Lane shrank back from that side of the vehicle. "I guess it's certain this man was the last to see Redmond alive."

"Drive on!" said Lane to the teamster; but the man hesitated, while, when his employer snatched up the reins, there was another murmur deeper than before, and mounted men closed about the wagon, their figures cutting blackly against the fading light. Why they were journeying homewards in such company I did not learn, but, overtaking it, they had perhaps ridden beside the wagon for the purpose of expressing their frank opinion of its occupant.

"Ye cannot pass until ye have answered my questions," said Sergeant Mackay. "If he does not dismount ye have authority to help him, Steel. Ye will hold the horses, Trooper Cotton."

Lane slowly climbed down the wheel, and neither Mackay nor Cotton interfered when, as he showed signs of remaining at the foot of it, Steel's hand closed firmly on his neck and forced him forwards, apparently much against his wishes. Then the ruined farmer held him, protesting savagely, beside the body of his victim. It was, in its own way, an impressive scene—the erect soldierly figures of the uniformed troopers, the circle of silent mounted men who only moved to soothe their uneasy horses and the white-faced man who shivered visibly as he looked down at the sodden heap at his feet. There was also, even had the two been strangers, ample excuse for him.

"While protesting that this is an outrage, I am ready to answer your questions," he said huskily.

"Who is this man? Did ye know him?" asked the sergeant, whose face remained woodenly impassive.

"Rancher Redmond, by his clothing," was the answer. "Yes; if necessary I think I could swear to him." And the sergeant asked again: "When and where did ye last see him?"

"In the birch *coulée,* at dusk, three weeks past Tuesday. That would make it——" But the financier seemed unable to work out the simple sum, and concluded: "You can figure the date for yourself."

"What business had ye with him?" and the sergeant smiled drily at the answer: "That does not concern you."

"Maybe, no. If ye have good reasons for not telling I will not press ye, though ye may be called upon to speak plainly. Do ye know how he came into the river?"

"No," said Lane, a trifle too vehemently.

"Do ye know of any reason why he should have drowned himself?" And Lane turned upon the questioner savagely:

"I'll make you all suffer for your interference.

Why should I know? I challenge the right of anyone but a coroner to detain me."

"I'll let ye see my authority at the station if I find it necessary to take ye there," said the sergeant grimly. "Now will ye answer? Do ye know why this man ye had dealings with should wish to destroy himself?"

"You're presuming a good deal," was the answer; and Lane's face grew malevolent as he glanced at Steel and me. "How do you know he did destroy himself, any way; and if he did I guess it's an open secret he had trouble with Ormesby and Steel."

I sprang forward, but Cotton laid a heavy hand upon my shoulder, and there was a threatening ejaculation from one of the bystanders. "Well, to satisfy you, I solemnly declare I am in no way connected with what has befallen the deceased rancher, and know of no reason why he should attempt his life. This isn't a court, but because I'm in a hurry, and to stop chattering tongues, I call heaven to witness it is the truth."

I believed that, after a villainous attempt to divert suspicion to myself, the man was deliberately perjuring himself, and several of the bystanders must have believed it, too. Most of them were not wholly free from superstition, and their faces were almost expectant as they stood strung up and intent about the dead man under the deepening gloom. Then a flicker of pale lightning filled the hollow. Each face was lit up for a second, and Lane's was livid; while, when the flash faded, the dusk seemed to deepen suddenly, and a boom of distant thunder rolled from swelling level to level across the prairie. Thunder had been very frequent during the last few weeks, but the listeners seemed to find the coincidence significant.

"Ye can pass," said the sergeant, whose voice seemed a trifle unsteady. "But it will be on horseback, and we may want ye later. Lardeau—it's a charity—ye will lend Redmond the wagon."

"You can't have it," said Lane. "I have a long journey before me and a rheumatic thigh. If you take the wagon I hired what am I to do?"

"You can ride with Redmond. His house is on your way, and you can't hurt him, any way. The poor devil's beyond you now," said a stern voice; and Lane, who allowed the teamster to help him on to one of the horses which was replaced, departed hurriedly.

"I congratulate ye," said Sergeant Mackay significantly. "He was a fellow creature, boys. Who'll help lift him in with me? We will e'en need the same service ourselves some day."

I shuddered, but took my place with Steel among the rest; and when the task was accomplished the latter expressed both our feelings as he said: "I wouldn't for five hundred dollars do that again; but it seemed the poor devil's due after what we said about him. I guess he wasn't quite responsible, and was driven to it crazy; but God help the man who drove him when it comes to the reckoning."

It was dark when we gained the level, and followed the creaking wagon that jolted before us across the prairie. Few words were spoken. A low rumbling of thunder rolled across the great emptiness, while now and then a pale blue flash fell athwart the lathered horses and set faces of the men. "The beasts," said one big farmer, "know considerable more than they can tell. Look at the near one sweating. I guess they find Redmond or the load he's carrying mighty heavy."

"Then," said another voice, which broke harshly through the thud of hoofs, "ten teams wouldn't move the other man who rode away."

The ways of the prairie dwellers are in some respects modern and crudely new; but the Highland servants of the Hudson's Bay Company and French half-breed *voyageur* have between them left us a dowry of quaint belief and superstition, and the growl of the thunder and black darkness made a due impression upon most of those who brought Redmond home. For my part I was thankful when a lonely log-house loomed up ahead and the wagon came to a standstill. Four men, improvising a stretcher, took up their burden, and halted as Sergeant Mackay and another, neither of whom seemed to care about his errand, beat upon the door.

A young woman opened it, holding aloft a lamp, and under its uncertain light her face showed drawn and pale. I breathed harder, and heard some of those about me murmur compassionately, for she looked very frail and young to bear what must follow. The sergeant's words did not reach us, but a swift glare of blue flame, that left us dazzled, broke in upon them. The whole space about the building was flooded with temporary brilliancy, and Redmond's daughter must have seen us standing about the wagon and the bearers waiting, for she dropped the lantern (which Mackay seized in time), and caught at the logs which framed the door as if for support. A minute must have passed before the slight form once more stood erect upon the threshold.

"Mackay thinks of everything," Steel said in my ear. "He sent Gordon off to bring his wife along. There's only the half-breed here, and she'll need a white woman with her to-night, poor soul."

"Bring him in," said a low voice; and before the sergeant could prevent her, the speaker, snatching up the lantern, moved forward to meet the bearers. It was no sight for young eyes she must have looked upon, and I saw Steel shudder; but there was wild Erse blood in the girl, and, holding one arm up, she stood erect, facing us again.

"This was my father, and he was a kind man to me," she said, with a choking gasp that was not a sob, and from which her voice broke high and shrill. "For the sake of a few acres and cattle he was driven to his death, and may black sorrow follow the man who ruined him. Sorrow and bitterness, with the fear that will drive sleep from him and waste him blood and bone until he takes the curse of the widow and orphan with him into the flame of hell!"

Then the eerie voice sank again, and it was with a strange dignity she concluded: "I thank you, neighbors. You can bring him in."

Another paler flash lit up the prairie as they carried Redmond in, while, when a wagon came bouncing up to the fence, Steel said: "Here's Mrs. Gordon; they have lost no time. Are you coming back, Ormesby? I've had about enough of this."

I had no wish to linger, and when we rode homewards through the deluge that now thrashed our faces, the sergeant, who overtook us, said: "Man, I feel creepy! She's no' quite canny, and yon was awesome."

"It was impressive; but you can't attach much importance to that poor girl's half-distracted raving," I said, partly to convince myself.

"Maybe no," said Sergeant Mackay. "Superstition, ye say; but I'm thinking there's a judgment here as well as the hereafter, and I'd no' care to carry yon curse about with me."

IX.

A PRAIRIE STUDY.

So Redmond came home, and we buried him the following night by torchlight on a desolate ridge of the prairie. It was his daughter who ordered this; and if some of those who held aloft the flaming tow guessed his secret they kept it for the sake of the girl who stood with a stony, tearless face beside the open grave. He had doubtless yielded to strong compulsion when driven into a corner from which, for one of his nature, there was no escape, and now he was dead I had transferred my score against him to the debit of the usurer. As we rode home after the funeral I said something of the kind to Steel, who agreed with me.

"If you concluded to try it, Thorn and Jo and I, taking our affidavits as to what we saw that night, might make out a case for you; but I don't know that we could fix it on Lane, and it strikes me as mean to drag a dead man into the fuss for nothing," he said. "Redmond has gone to a place where he can't testify, but he has left his daughter, and she has about all she can stand up under already."

"Strikes me that way, too; and Lane's too smart to be corraled," added Thorn.

"We'll get even without Redmond somehow, and to that end you two will have to run Gaspard's Trail," I said. "I'm going down to Montreal with Carolan's cattle."

A project had for some little time been shaping itself in my mind. I had a small revisionary interest in some English property, and though it would be long before a penny of it could accrue to me, it seemed just possible to raise a little money thereupon. Considering Western rates of interest nobody in Winnipeg would trouble with such an investment, but I had a distant and prosperous kinsman in Montreal who might find some speculator willing. Montreal was, however, at least two thousand miles away, and traveling expensive; but the Carolan brothers had promptly accepted my offer to take charge of their cattle destined for Europe, which implied free passes both ways. It was not the mode of traveling one would have expected a prosperous rancher to adopt, but I needed every available dollar for the approaching struggle, and was well content when, after the untamed stock had nearly wrecked the railroad depot, we got them on board the cars. The only time I ever saw Sergeant Mackay thoroughly disconcerted was that morning.

We came up out of the empty prairie riding on the flanks of the herd, and the beasts had suffered from the scarcity of water. They were in an uncertain temper, while, as luck would have it, just as they surged close-packed between the bare frame houses, Mackay and a trooper came riding down the unpaved street of the little prairie town. There was no opening either to right or left, and the more prudent storekeepers put up their shutters.

"Look as if they owned the universe, them police," said the man who cantered up beside me. "Sure, it would take the starch out of them if anything did start the cattle."

Mackay pulled up his horse, and looked at the mass of tossing horns rolling towards him dubiously. "'Tis not in accordance with regulations to turn a big draft loose on a peaceful town. Why did ye not split them up?" he said. "Ye could be held responsible if there's damage done."

"I'm afraid these beasts don't understand regulations, and I had to bring them as best I could," I answered; and my assistant shouted, "Get out of the daylight, sergeant, dear, while your shoes are good."

Mackay seemed to resent this familiarity, and sat still, with one hand on his hip, an incarnation of official dignity, though he kept his eyes upon the fast advancing herd until the big freight locomotive which was awaiting us set up a discordant shrieking, and backed a row of clanging cars across the switches. That was sufficient for the untamed cattle. With a thunder of pounding hoofs they poured tumultuously down the rutted street, and I caught a brief glimpse of the sergeant hurriedly wheeling his horse before everything was blotted out by the stirred up dust. The streets of a prairie town are inches deep in powdered loam all summer, and bottomless sloughs in spring.

A wild shout of "Faugh-a-ballagh!" rang out of it; and I found myself riding faster than was prudent along the crazy plank sidewalk to pass and, if possible, swing the stampeding herd into the railroad corral. How my horse gained the three-foot elevation and avoided falling over the dry goods bales and flour bags which lay littered everywhere, I do not remember, but my chief assistant, Dennis, who, yelling his hardest, charged recklessly down the opposite one, afterwards declared that his beast climbed up the steps like a kitten. Then, as I drew a little ahead, Mackay became dimly visible, riding bareheaded as for his life, with the horns, that showed through the tossed up grit, a few yards behind him. Fortunately the stock-yard gates were open wide, and Dennis came up at a gallop in time to head the herd off from a charge across the prairie, while a second man and I turned their opposite wing. Mackay did his best to wheel his horse clear of the gates, but the beast was evidently bent on getting as far as possible from the oncoming mass, and resisted bit and spur. Then there was a great roar of laughter from loungers and stock-yard hands as the dust swept up towards heaven and the drove thundered through the opening.

"Where's the sergeant?" I shouted; and Dennis, who chuckled so that his speech was thick, made answer: "Sure he's in the corral. The beasts have run him in, but it's mighty tough beef they'd find him in the old counthry."

Dennis was right, for when the haze thinned the sergeant appeared, as white as a miller, flattened up against the rails, while a playful steer curvetted in the vicinity as though considering where to charge him. He was extricated by pulling down the rails, and accepted my apologies stiffly.

"This," he said, disregarding the offer of a lounger to wash him under the locomotive tank, "is not just what I would have expected of ye, Rancher Ormesby."

While, amidst an almost indescribable tumult, the stock were being transferred to the cars, I met Miss Redmond on the little sod platform.

"I am glad I have met you because I am going to Winnipeg, and may never see you again," she said. "There is much I do not understand, but I feel you have been wronged, and want to thank you for your consideration."

Redmond's daughter had received some training in an Eastern convent, it was said, and I found it hard to believe that the very pale, quietly-spoken girl was the one who had called down the curses upon Foster Lane. Still, I knew there was a strain of something akin to insanity in that family, and that, in addition, she was of the changeful nature which accompanies pure Celtic blood.

"You should not indulge in morbid fancies, and have very little cause for gratitude. We were only sincerely sorry for you, and tried to do what we could," I said.

Ailin Redmond fixed her black eyes intently upon me, and I grew uneasy, seeing what suggested a smouldering fire in them. "You are not clever enough to deceive a woman," she said, with a disconcerting composure. "I do not know all, but perhaps I shall some day, and then, whatever it costs me, you and another person shall see justice done. It may not be for a long time, but I can wait, and am going away from the prairie. Still, I would like to ask you one question—how did your cattle get inside the fence?"

"The fire drove them; but you must, in place of fretting over such things, try to forget the last two months as soon as possible," I answered as stoutly as I could, seeking meanwhile an excuse for flight, which certainly was not lacking. "But those beasts will kill somebody if I neglect them any longer."

Ailin Redmond held out her hand to me, saying, very quietly: "I shall never forget, and—it is no use protesting—a time will come when I shall understand it all clearly. Until then may the good saints protect you from all further evil, Rancher Ormesby."

As I hurried away a tented wagon lurched into the depot, and when I last saw Redmond's daughter she stood near the lonely end of the platform talking earnestly with the traveling photographer.

Dennis had not recovered from his merriment when, much to the satisfaction of those we left behind, the long cars rolled out of the depot, while many station agents remembered our visit to those which succeeded. Blinding dust and fragments of ballast whirled about the cars as the huge locomotive hauled them rocking over the limitless levels, which must have been rendered odoriferous for a league behind. From sunrise to sunset the gaunt telegraph poles reeled up from the receding horizon, growing from the size of matches to towering spars as they came, and then slowly diminishing far down the straight-ruled line again. For hours we lay waiting in side-tracks until one of the great inter-ocean expresses, running their portion of the race round half the globe, thundered past white with the dust of a fifteen hundred miles journey, and then, with cars and cattle complaining, lurched on our way again.

At times we led out the beasts in detachments to water at wayside stations, and there was usually much profanity and destruction of property before we got them back again, and left the agent to assess the damage to his feelings, besides splintered gangways and broken rails. It was at Portage or Brandon, I think, that one showed me a warning received by the wires. "Through freight full of wild beasts coming along. There'll be nothing left of your depot if you let the lunatics in charge of them turn their menagerie out."

The beasts had, however, grown more subdued before the cars rolled slowly into Winnipeg city, and gave little trouble when, leaving the prairie behind, we sped, eastwards ever, past broad lake and foaming river and into the muskegs of Ontario, so that I had time for reflection when the great locomotive, panting on the grades, hauled us, poised giddily between crag face and deep blue water, along the Superior shore. The Haldanes were in Montreal, and I wondered, in case chance threw me in their way, how they would greet me, and what I should say. I was apparently a prosperous rancher when they last spoke with me, and a tender of other men's cattle now, while it might well happen that in their eyes a further cloud rested upon me.

The longest and weariest journey comes to an end at last, and when the big engines ceased their panting beside the broad St. Lawrence I left Dennis and his companions to divert themselves in Montreal after the fashion of their kind, and, arraying myself in civilized fashion, proceeded to my relative's offices.

A clerk said Mr. Leyland, who was absent, desired me to follow him to his autumn retreat, but I first set about the business which had brought me, unassisted. Nobody, however, would entertain the species of investment I had to propose, and it was with a heavy heart I boarded the cars again some days later.

Leyland and his wife appeared unaffectedly glad to see me at their pretty summer house, which stood above the smooth white shingle fringing a wide lake, and at sunset that evening I lay smoking among the boulders of a point while his son and heir sat close by interrogating me. Part of the lake still reflected the afterglow, and after the monotonous levels of the prairie it rested my eyes to see the climbing pines tower above it in shadowy majesty. Their drowsy scent was soothing, and through the dusk that crept towards me from their feet, blinking lights cast trembling reflections across the glassy water. Several prosperous citizens retired at times to spend their leisure in what they termed camping on the islets of that lake.

"Air you poor and wicked?" asked the urchin inspecting me critically.

"Very poor, and about up to the average for iniquity," I said; and the diminutive questioner rubbed his curly locks as though puzzled.

"Well, you don't quite look neither," he commented. "Poor men don't wear new store clothes. The last one I saw had big holes in his pants, and hadn't eaten nothing for three weeks, he said. Pop, he spanked me good 'cos I gave him four dollars off'n the bureau to buy some dinner with. Say, how long was it since you had a square meal, any way? You did mighty well at supper. I was watching you."

"It is about two months since I had a meal like that, and then it was because a friend of mine gave it me," I answered truthfully; and Leyland junior rubbed his head again.

"No—you don't look very low down, but you must be," he repeated. "Pop was talking 'bout you, and he said: 'You'll do your best to see the poor devil has a good time, Twoinette. From what I gather he needs it pretty bad.'"

I laughed, perhaps somewhat hollowly, for the child commented: "Won't you do that again? It's just like a loon. There's one lives over yonder, and he might answer. Ma, she says people should never make a noise when they laugh; but when I sent Ted on the roof to get my ball, and he fell into the rain-butt, she just laughed worse than you, and her teeth came out."

"Your mother would probably spank you for telling that to strange folks. But who is Ted?" I said, remembering that a loon is a water-bird which sets up an unearthly shrieking in the stillness of the night; and the urchin rebuked me with the cheerful disrespect for his seniors which characterizes the Colonial born.

"Say, was you forgotten when brains were given out? He's just Ted Caryl, and I think he's bad. Pop says his firm are meaner than road agents. He comes round evenings and swops business lies with Pop, 'specially when Bee is here, but he can't be clever. Ma says he don't even know enough to be sure which girl he wants. They is two of them, and I like Lou best."

"Why?" I asked, because the urchin seemed to expect some comment; and he proceeded to convince me. "They is both pretty, but Lou is nicest. I found it out one day I'd been eating corduroy candy, and Bee she just dropped me when I got up on her knee. She didn't say anything, but she looked considerable. Then I went to Lou, and she picked me up and gave me nicer candies out of a gilt-edge box. Ma says she must have been an angel, because her dress was all sticky, and I think she is. There was one just like her with silver wings in the church at

Sault Chaudiere. One night Ma and them was talking 'bout you, and Bee sits quite still as if she didn't care, but she was listening. Lou, she says: 'Poor ———.' I don't think it was poor devil."

"Do you know where little boys who tell all they hear go to?" I asked; and Leyland junior pointed to a dusky sail that showed up behind the island before he answered wearily: "You make me tired. I've been asked that one before. Here's Ted and the others coming. I'm off to see what they have brought for me."

He vanished among the boulders, and, filling my pipe again, I kept still, feeling no great inclination to take part in the casual chatter of people whose customs I had almost lost touch with. I was struck by the resemblance of the names the child mentioned to those of Haldane's daughters, but both were tolerably common, and it did not please me that Mrs. Leyland should make a story of my struggles for the amusement of strangers. So some time had passed before I entered the veranda of the little wooden house, and, as it was only partially lighted by a shaded lamp, managed to find a place almost unobserved in a corner. Thus I had time to recover from my surprise at the sight of Beatrice and Lucille Haldane seated at a little table beneath the lamp. Two men I did not know leaned against the balustrade close at hand, and several more were partly distinguishable in the shadows. From where I sat some of the figures were projected blackly against a field of azure and silver, for the moon now hung above the lake. Beatrice Haldane was examining what appeared to be a bound collection of photographic reproductions.

"Yes. As Mrs. Leyland mentions, I have met the original of this picture, and it is a good one, though it owes something to the retoucher," she said; and I saw my hostess smile wickedly at her husband when somebody said: "Tell us about him. How interesting!"

Beatrice Haldane answered lightly: "There is not much to tell. The allegorical title explains itself, if it refers to the edict that it is in the sweat of his brow man shall earn his bread, which most of our acquaintances seem to have evaded. The West is a hard, bare country, and its inhabitants, though not wholly uncivilized, hard men. I would rather like to send some of our amateur athletes to march or work with them. This one is merely a characteristic specimen."

I wondered what the subject of the picture was, but waited an opportunity to approach the speaker, while, as I did so, a young man said: "I would rather like to take up your sister's challenge. Pulling the big cat-boat across here inside an hour without an air of wind was not exactly play; but can you tell us anything more about these tireless Westerners, Miss Lucille?"

The younger girl, who sat quietly with her hands in her lap, looked up. "It is the fashion never to grow enthusiastic; but I am going to tell you, Ted. Those men were always in real earnest, and that is why they interested me; but I wouldn't take up the challenge if I were you. We call this camping. They lie down to sleep on many a journey in a snow trench under the arctic frost, ride as carelessly through blinding blizzard as summer heat, and, I concluded, generally work all day and half the night. They are not hard in any other sense, but very generous, though they sometimes speak, as they live, very plainly."

Some of the listeners appeared amused, others half-inclined to applaud the girl, and there was a little laughter when Miss Haldane interposed: "This is my sister's hobby. Some of them, you may remember, seem to live upon gophers, Lucille."

Lucille Haldane did not appear pleased at this interruption; but the flush of animation and lustre in her eyes wonderfully became her. "I do not know that even gophers would be worse than the canned goose livers and other disgusting things we import for their weight in silver," she said. "All I saw in the West pleased me, and, because I am a Canadian first and last, I don't mind being smiled at for admitting that I am very glad I have seen the men who live there at their work. They are doing a great deal for our country."

"They could not have a stancher or prettier champion, my dear," said a gray-haired man who sat near me. "It would be hard to grow equally enthusiastic about your profession, Ted."

"It is Miss Haldane's genius which makes the most of everybody's good points," answered a young man with a frank face and stalwart appearance, turning towards me. "I am afraid the rest of us would only see a tired and dusty farmer who looked as if twelve hours' sleep would be good for him. What's your idea of the West? If I remember Mrs. Leyland correctly you come from the land of promise, don't you?"

"We certainly work tolerably hard out there, but it is no great credit to us when we have to choose between that and starving; and the West is the land of disappointment as well as promise," I answered drily.

The rest glanced round in our direction, and Mrs. Leyland laughed mischievously. "If any of you are really interested, my friend here, who came in so quietly, would, I daresay, answer your questions. Let me present you, Rancher Ormesby."

I bowed as, endeavoring to remember the names that followed, I moved towards the chair beside her when she beckoned. It lay full in the light, and I noticed blank surprise in the faces turned towards me. Beatrice Haldane dropped the album, and for some reason the clear rose color surged upwards from her sister's neck. I stooped to recover the book, which lay open, and then stared at it with astonishment and indignation, for the face of the man standing beside a weary team, waist-deep in the tall grass of a sloo, was unmistakably my own. I had forgotten the click of the camera shutter that hot morning.

"It was hardly fair of my hostess not to warn me, and this print was published without my knowledge or consent," I said. "Still, it shows how we earn a living in my country, and I can really tell you little more. We resemble most other people in that we chiefly exert ourselves under pressure of necessity—and one would prefer to forget that fact during a brief holiday."

The listeners either smiled or nodded good-humoredly, and it was Lucille Haldane who held out her hand to me, while her elder sister returned my salutation with civilty which was distinct from cordiality. How Mrs. Leyland changed the situation I do not remember, nor how, when some of the party were inspecting fire-flies in the grasses by the lake, I found myself beside Beatrice Haldane at the end of the veranda. I had schooled myself in preparation for a possible meeting, but she looked so beautiful with the moonlight upon her that I spoke rashly.

"We parted good friends—but no one could have hoped you felt the slightest pleasure at the present meeting."

"Frankness is sometimes irksome to both speaker and listener," said the girl, turning her dark eyes upon me steadily. "Can you not be satisfied with the possibility of your being mistaken?"

"No," I answered doggedly, and she smiled. "Then suppose one admitted you had surmised correctly?"

"I would ask the cause," and Beatrice Haldane, saying nothing, looked a warning, which, being filled with an insane bitterness, I would not take. "It would hurt me to conclude that those you honored with your friendship on the prairie would be less welcome here."

She raised her head a little with the Haldane's pride, which, though never paraded, was unmistakable. "You should have learned to know us better. Neither would your prosperity or the reverse have made any difference."

"Then is there no explanation?" I said, forgetting everything under the strain of the moment; and it was evident that Beatrice Haldane shared her sister's courage, for, though there was a darker spot in the centre of either cheek, she answered steadily: "There is. We are disappointed in you, Rancher Ormesby."

Then, without another word, she turned away, and presently the rattle of oars and a gleam of moonlit canvas told that the catboat was returning across the lake.

"I hope you have enjoyed the meeting with your other friends," said Mrs. Leyland, presently. "Very much, I assure you," I said, with an effort which I hope will be forgiven me.

X.

A TEMPTATION.

LEYLAND had a weakness for what he termed hardening himself by occasional feats of endurance, from which it resulted that I spent several days in his company wandering, with a wholly unnecessary load of camp gear upon my back, through a desolation of uncomfortably wooded hills. Now it is not easy for a business man of domesticated habits to emulate a pack mule and enjoy the proceeding, and when Mrs. Leyland, after burdening her husband with everything she could think of, desired to add a small tin bath, there was little difficulty in predicting that our journey would not be extensive. Having a load of fifty pounds already, I ignored the suggestion that I might carry the bath, and hurried Leyland off before his spouse could further hamper us. One thick blanket, a kettle, and a few pounds of provisions would have amply sufficed, so a large-sized tent seemed to be distinctly superfluous, to say nothing of the bag filled with hair-brushes, towels, and scented soap.

Leyland commenced the march with enthusiasm, and certainly presented a picturesque appearance as he plodded along in leather jacket and fringed leggings, with the folded tent upon his shoulders and a collection of tin utensils jingling about him. I was somewhat similarly caparisoned, and, because it would have hurt his feelings, overcame the temptation to fling half my load into a creek we crossed, though this would have greatly pleased me. A fourth of the weight would have sufficed for a two hundred mile journey in the West.

"There is nothing like judicious exercise for bracing one's whole system," panted my companion, when we had covered the first league in two hours or so. "How a wide prospect like this one rests the vision. Say, can't we sit down and enjoy it a little?"

I nodded agreement, and we spent most of that day in sitting down and smoking, while, as it happened, a sudden breeze blew the tent over upon us at midnight, and anybody who has crawled clear of the thrashing canvas under such circumstances can guess what followed. Leyland, as generally happens, wriggled head-foremost into what might be termed the pocket of the net, and it cost me some trouble to extricate him. Next morning he awoke with a toothache and general shortness of temper, as the result of trying to sleep in the rain, and appeared much less certain about the benefits to be derived from such excursions.

"If you will let me pick out the few things we really want and throw the rest away, I'll engage that you will enjoy the remainder of the march," I said.

"I wish I could, but it can't be done;" and Leyland, staring ruefully at his load, shook his head. "Twoinette's so—so blamed systematic, and if one of those brushes were missing she'd have to start in from the beginning with a whole new toilet outfit. Of course, you don't understand these things yet, but you will some day. A wife with cultured tastes requires to be considered accordingly."

I was resting upon one elbow gazing up between the pine branches at the blue of the sky, with the clean-scented needles crackling under me, and made no answer. Nevertheless, it struck me that I might find too much culture irksome, especially if it implied that I must carry half my household sundries upon my back whenever I started on an expedition. Hitherto I had not considered this side of the question when indulging in certain roseate visions, but as Leyland spoke there opened up unpleasant possibilities of having to stand by, a mere director, clear of the heat and dust of effort, and pay others to do the work I found pleasure in for me. Then as I reflected that there was small need to trouble about such eventualities, a face, that was not Beatrice Haldane's, rose up before my fancy. It was forceful as well as pretty, quick to express sympathy and enthusiasm; and I decided that the man who won Lucille Haldane would have a helpmate who would encourage instead of restrain his energies, and, if need be, take her place beside him in the struggle. Then I dismissed the subject as having nothing to do with me.

Leyland seemed loath to resume his rambles, and on the following morning, after he had, I fancy, lain awake abusing the mosquitoes all night, his patience broke down. "I'm getting too old to enjoy this description of picnic as I used," he said. "The fact is, if I mule this confounded bric-à-brac around much longer I shall drop in my tracks."

"Shall we turn back?" I asked him.

The tired man shook his head. "We'll strike for water, and if we can't find a canoe anywhere you can build a raft. I wouldn't crawl through any more of those muskegs for five hundred dollars."

I had no objections, and Leyland's comments became venomous during the march, for the lake was distant, and the pine woods thick. He fell into thickets, and shed his burden broadcast across the face of each steeper descent, so that it cost us many minutes to collect it again, while once we spent an hour in the mire of a muskeg on hands and knees in search of a vine-pattern mustard spoon. Leyland, who became profane during the proceedings, said his wife might consider that its loss would destroy the harmony of a whole dinner service. At last, however—my comrade, panting heavily, and progressing with a crab-like gait, because he had wrenched one knee and blistered a heel—the broad lake showed up beneath the blazing maple leaves ahead. They were donning their full glories of gold and crimson before the coming of the frost.

"Thank heaven!" said Leyland with fervent sincerity. "I'll sit here for ever unless you can find something to float me home."

He limped on until we were clear of the trees, and then flung himself down among the boulders with a gasp of relief, for fortune had treated him kindly. There was a fresh breeze blowing, and the broad stretch of water was streaked by lines of frothy white; but we had come out upon a sheltered bay, and a big cat-boat lay moored beneath a ledge. A group of figures rose from about a crackling fire, there was a shout of recognition, and the young man I had been introduced to as Ted Caryl came forward to greet us.

"Just in time! The kettle's boiling; but have you been practising for a strong man circus, Leyland?" he said. My companion, still retaining his recumbent position, answered drily: "I have been taking exercise and diverting myself."

"So one might have fancied from your exhilarated appearance," commented Caryl. "We can give you a passage home by water if you have had enough of it."

"I'll go no other way if I have to swim," said Leyland grimly.

Then the younger man turned to me: "Do you happen to know anything about seamanship?"

"I spent all my spare time as a youngster helping to sail small craft on the English coast, and was considered a fair helmsman for my age," I said; and Caryl patted my shoulder approvingly.

"It's a mercy, because I know just next to nothing. Put up as a yacht club member, and bought this craft—she's a daisy—for five hundred dollars to give the girls a sail. Brought them down, with a light fair wind, smart enough, but though it's done round, the thing don't steer the way she ought to in a breeze. So I've been getting mighty anxious as to how I'm to take them home again, and feel too scared to say so."

I looked at the craft, which was a half-decked boat, evidently fitted with a centre-board, of the broad-beamed shallow type common on the American coast. She carried no bowsprit, her lofty mast was stepped almost in her bows, and the combination of heavy spars, short body, and wide, flat stern, presaged difficulties for an unskilled helmsman when running before any strength of breeze. "I think you have some reason for your misgivings," I said. "If the wind freshens much I would almost recommend you to camp here all night."

We had by this time approached the fire, and I noticed, with a slight inward hesitation, that Haldane's daughters and an elderly lady were busy preparing tea. Perhaps it was this which prevented Beatrice from noticing me, but Lucille came forward and greeted us. "You have arrived at an opportune moment. Supper is just about ready, and if it is not so good as the one you gave us at Gaspard's Trail, we will try to do our best for you," she said.

"Have you not forgotten that evening yet?" I asked. A transitory expression I did not quite comprehend became visible in the girl's face when she answered my smile. It was pleasant to think she recalled the evening of which I had not forgotten the smallest incident.

"It was something so new to me, and you were all so kind," she said.

There was dismay when Caryl announced my opinion, though the rest decided to postpone a decision in the hope that the weather might improve, and it seemed useless to inform them that the reverse appeared more probable. A pine forest rolled down to the water's edge, and when the meal had been despatched I lounged with my back against a tree, when Leyland came up. "You look uncommonly lazy—more played out than me. We want you to enjoy your stay with us, and I hope I have not tired you," he said.

I laughed a little, because Leyland was hardly likely to tire any man fresh from the arduous life of the prairie. "It's an oasis in the desert, and you have made me so comfortable that I shall almost shrink from going back," I said, truthfully enough; for, before I left, the strain at Gaspard's Trail had grown acute.

"Then what do you want to go back for, any way?" asked Leyland, who had made several pertinent inquiries concerning my affairs during the afternoon. "There are chances for a live man in the cities—in fact, I know of one or two. No doubt for a time it's experience, but it strikes me that this cattle roasting and losing of grain crops must mean a big loss of opportunities as well as grow monotonous."

Leyland, I fancied, had not previously noticed that Miss Haldane was seated on a fallen log close beside us, and under the circumstances I was by no means pleased when he turned to her. "Don't you think everybody should make the most of all that's in them?" he said.

Somewhat to my surprise the girl looked straight at me as she answered: "Considering the question in the abstract I agree with you. It seems to me the duty of every man with talents to take the place among his peers he was meant for instead of frittering them away."

There was an unusual earnestness in what she said, which both surprised and reminded me of the days in England; for Beatrice Haldane's conversation had latterly been marked by a somewhat cynical languidness. Nevertheless, the inference nettled me.

"Talent is a somewhat vague term; but suppose any unprofessional person possessed it, what career among the thick of his fellows would you recommend—the acquisition of dollars on the markets, or politics for an end? Both are closed to the poor man," I said.

It may have been fancy, but a faint angry sparkle seemed to creep into one listener's eyes as she answered: "Are there no others? It seems to me the place for such a person is where civilization moves faster in the cities. Whether we progress towards good or evil you cannot move back the times, and it is force of intellect, or successful scheming if you will, which commands the best the world can offer now. As an outside observer, it seems to me that, considering the tendency towards centralization and combinations of capital, the individual who, refusing to accept the altered conditions, insists on remaining an independent unit, must soon go under or take a helot's place. Don't you think so, Mr. Leyland?"

"That's what I mean, but you have put it more clearly," said Leyland approvingly. "I was hoping Ormesby might see it that way."

Understanding my host's manner I guessed that if I hinted at acquiescence this would lead up to a definite offer, and it appeared that both, in their own way, were bent on persuading me. The temptation was also alluring then, when disaster appeared imminent, and I aferwards wondered how it was I did not yield. Wounded pride or sheer obstinacy may, however, have restrained me, for one of the most bitter things is to own oneself beaten; but even then I felt that my place was on the prairie. On the one hand there was only the prospect of grinding care and often brutal labor, which wore the body to exhaustion and blunted the mental faculties; on the other, at least some rest and leisure, contact with culture and refinement, and perhaps even yet a vague possibility of drawing nearer to the woman beside me. At that moment, as it happened, Lucille Haldane halted in front of us, and the trifling incident helped to turn the scale. Young as she was, her views were mine, and for some unfathomable reason I shook off what seemed a weak tendency to yield when I met her gaze.

"It will be a bad day for the Dominion when what is happening across the frontier becomes general here," I said. "It is the number of independent units which makes for the real prosperity of this country, and the suggestion that there is only scope for intellect and force of will in the cities can hardly pass unchallenged. The smallest wheat grower has to use the same foresight in his degree as a railroad financier, and it probably requires more stamina to hold out against bad seasons and the oppression of scheming land-grabbers than is requisite, say, in engineering a grain corner against adverse markets. Then, if one gets back to principles, does it not appear that the poorest breaker of virgin land who calls wheat up out of the idle sod is more use to the community than the gambler in his produce who creates nothing?"

"There is no use arguing with any man who thinks that way," said Leyland solemnly, and Beatrice Haldane laughed; but whether at his comment or my opinions did not appear.

"Here is an ally for you. You are looking very wise, Lucille," she said languidly.

"I did not hear all you said, but I think Mr. Ormesby is partly right," was the frank answer. "I just stopped on my way to the boat to get some wrappings. It soon grows chilly."

The girl refused our offers of assistance. Somebody called Leyland away, and I was left alone, possibly against both our wishes, in Beatrice Haldane's company. Still, it was an opportunity that might not occur again, and I determined to turn it to good account.

"Although you expressed strong disapproval not long ago, one could have fancied you were not speaking from a wholly impersonal standpoint and meant to give me good advice," I said.

The spirit which had carried Haldane triumphantly through commercial panic was not lacking in either of his daughters, and the elder one quietly took up the challenge. "Perhaps the other could not be thrust aside, and I have wondered whether you are wise in staking all your future on the chances of success on the prairie. There are greater possibilities in the busy world that lies before you now, but presently habit and the force of associations will bind you to the soil, and you must remain a raiser of cattle and sower of grain. Is it not possible for the monotony and drudgery to drag one down to a steadily sinking level?"

The words stung me. I had done my best in my vocation, and it seemed had failed therein. Neither was it impossible that the last sentence possessed a definite meaning, and suppressed longing and resentment against the pressure of circumstances held me silent after I had managed to check the rash answer that rose to my lips. Then a shout broke through the pause which followed, and Beatrice Haldane sprang to her feet. "Lucille has set the boat adrift. Go and help her if you can," she said.

A glance showed me the cat-boat sliding out towards open water before the angry white ripples which crisped the little bay, for here the wind, deflected by a hollow, blew freshly off-shore. A slight white-clad figure stood on the fore deck, and I shouted: "Jump down and fling the anchor over!"

"There is no anchor!" the answer reached me faintly; and I set off across a strip of shingle and boulders at a floundering run.

The rest of the company were gathered in dismay upon a rocky ledge when I came up, and Caryl tore off his jacket. Leyland turned to me, with consternation in his face, as he said: "Ted must have tied some fool knot and she's blowing right out across the lake. None of us can swim."

"It's my fault, and I'm going to try, any way. The water cannot be deep inside here," gasped the valiant Caryl.

I saw that, for inland waters, a tolerable sea was running where the true wind blew straight down the lake, sufficient to endanger the cat-boat if she drifted without control athwart it. There was evidently no time to lose, and I turned angrily upon Caryl. "If you jump in here you will certainly drown, and that will help nobody," I said.

Then, seeing some feet of water below the ledge, I launched myself out head-foremost. The ripples ran white behind me when I rose, and there was no great difficulty in swimming down-wind, even when cumbered by clothing; but the boat's side and mast exposed considerable surface to the blast, and she had blown some distance to leeward before I overtook her. It also cost me time and labor to crawl on board—an operation difficult in deep water—but it was accomplished, and, turning to the girl, I said cheerfully: "You need not be frightened. We shall beat back in a few minutes if you will help me."

Lucille Haldane showed the courage she had done one snowy night at Bonaventure, for there was confidence in her face as she answered: "I will do whatever you tell me, and am not in the least afraid."

XI.

IN PERIL OF THE WATERS.

Again I hazarded a glance about me. The shallow-draughted craft had already drifted a distance off-shore, and was listing over under the pressure of the wind upon her lofty mast. The white ripples had grown to short angry surges, and because darkness was approaching and the narrow bay difficult to work into it was evident we must lose no time in getting back again. There was no anchor on board, and if I reefed the sail (or rolled up the foot of it to reduce the area) the boat would meanwhile increase her distance from the beach. It therefore seemed necessary to attempt to thrash back under the whole mainsail.

"Will you shove the centerboard down by the iron handle, and then take hold of the tiller, Miss Haldane?" I said.

The girl, stooping, thrust at the handle projecting from the trunk containing the draw-up centre keel. The iron plate should have dropped at a touch, but did not, and I sprang to her side when she said: "Something must be holding it fast."

She was right. Caryl had either bent the plate by striking a rock, or a piece of driftwood had jammed it in the slot it worked through, for, do what I would, the iron refused to fall more than a third of its proper distance, and it was with a slight shock of dismay I relinquished the struggle. A sailing craft of any description will only work to windward in zigzags diagonally to the breeze, and that only, provided there is enough of her under water to provide lateral resistance, which the deep centre keel should have supplied. As it was, I must attempt to remedy the deficiency by press of canvas at the risk of a capsize.

Fortunately my companion was quick-witted and cool, and, standing at the helm, followed my instructions promptly, while I dragged at the halliards, and the loose folds of sail-cloth rose thrashing overhead. I was breathless when the sail was set, but sprang aft to the helm, lifted the girl to the weather deck, and perched myself as high on that side as I could, with the mainsheet round my left wrist and my right hand on the tiller, wondering if the mast would bear the strain. The boat swayed down until her leeward deck was buried in a rush of foam and her bending mast slanted half-way to the horizontal. Little clouds of spray shot up from her weather bow as, gathering way, she swept ahead, and then gave place to sheets of water, which lashed our faces, and, sluicing deep along the decks, poured over the coaming ledge into the open well. Still, we were in comparatively smooth water where one could risk a little, and while the straining mainsheet, which I dare not make fast, sawed into my wrist, I glanced at my companion. Her hat was sodden—already her hair clung in soaked clusters to her forehead, and her wet face showed white against the dark water which raced past us behind it. Yet it was still confident, and her voice was level as she said: "Let me help you. That rope is cutting your wrist."

I could have smiled at the thought of those slender fingers sharing that strain; but thinking it would be well to keep her attention occupied, nodded, and was a trifle surprised at the relief when the girl seized the hard wet hemp. "If I say—let go—lift your hands at once," I said.

We were now tearing through the water at such a pace that the boat flung a good deal of what she displaced all over her, but a glance at the dark pines ashore showed that she was making very little to windward, while, when I looked over my shoulder at the boiling wake astern, it was too plainly evident that, owing to the loss of the centreboard, we were driving bodily sideways as well as ahead. Also the snowy froth which lapped higher up the lee deck was perilously near the coaming protecting the open well. Still, our expectant friends stood clustered among the boulders fringing one horn of the bay, and I saw that Caryl held a rope in his hand. We might just pass within reach of it on the next tack.

"We must come round. Slip down, and climb up on the opposite side as the sail swings over," I said, carefully shoving the tiller down.

There was a thrashing of canvas as the boat came round, and I breathed easier as, gathering way on the opposite tack, she headed well up for the boulder point where Caryl was somewhat awkwardly swinging the coil of rope. The point drew nearer and nearer, and I could see Beatrice Haldane standing rigidly still against the sombre pines, when, as ill-luck would have it, the dark branches set up a roaring as a wild gust swept down. The boat swayed further over. Most of her forward was buried in a rush of foam, and the water poured steadily into the well, but I still held fast the sheet which would have loosed the sail, for we might reach the rope in another two minutes. The gust increased in violence. Foam and water poured over the coamings in cataracts, and, seeing that otherwise a capsize was inevitable, I released the sheet. The canvas rattled furiously, the craft swayed upright, and commenced to blow away sternforemost like a feather, while I dropped into the bottom of her ankle deep in water.

"There is no help for it—we must reef. Take the tiller, and hold it—so," I said.

It was not without an effort I tied the tack, or forward corner of the main-sail, down; then, floundering aft, hauled the after-side of it down to the boom. That accomplished and the sail thus reduced by some two feet all along its foot, there remained the row of short lines, or reef points, which would hold the discarded portion when rolled up, to be tied; and when part of these were knotted it was with misgivings I leaped up on the after deck. The long, jerking boom projected a fathom beyond the stern, and I must hold on by my toes while leaning out over the water as I pulled the reef points at that end together.

"I am going to trust you with the safety of both of us, Miss Haldane," I said. "When you see the boom swing inwards pull the tiller towards you before it flings me off."

The girl had grown a litle paler, and her hands trembled on the helm, but she answered without hesitation: "Don't be longer than you can help—but I understand."

She showed a fine intelligence and a perfect self-command, or our voyage might have ended abruptly;

so the reefing was accomplished, and I resumed the helm. Meanwhile, however, we had drifted well out into the lake, and a few minutes sailing proved that under her reduced canvas the boat would not beat back to the windward shore. The figures among the boulders had faded into the deepening gloom, but, assuming a cheerfulness I did not feel, I said: "It is quite impossible to return, and as it is growing too late to look for a safe landing or path through the bush, we must head for home and send back horses for the others. It will be a fair wind."

"I was already afraid so," said the girl with a shiver. "But I hope we shall not be very long on the way. We spent five hours coming."

I knew we should travel at a pace approaching a steamer's, provided only the craft could be kept from filling; but, enlarging upon the former point, tried to conceal the latter possibility, as I put the helm up, and the craft, rising upright, but commencing to roll horribly, raced away down-wind towards open water. Once out of the point's shelter short but angry waves raced white behind her, for one may find sufficient turmoil of waters when a fresh gale sweeps the Canadian lakes. The rolling grew wilder, the long boom splashed heavily into the white upheavals that surged by on either side, and our progress became a series of upward rushes and swoops, until at times I feared the craft would run her bows under and go down bodily. Once I caught my companion glancing over the stern, and, knowing how ugly oncoming waves appear when they heave up behind a running vessel, laid a hand upon her shoulder and gently turned her head aside.

"There! You must only look that way, and tell me if you see any islands across our course," I said.

It was practically dark now, but I could distinguish the whiteness of her wet face, and see her shiver violently. My jacket was spongy, I had nothing to wrap her in, but she looked so wet and pitiful that I drew her towards me and slipped a dripping arm protectingly about her. Lucille Haldane made no demur. The wild rolling, flying spray, and rush of short tumbling ridges must have been sufficiently terrifying, and perhaps she found the contact reassuring.

One hand was all I needed. There was now nothing any unassisted man could do except keep the craft straight before wind and sea, but it was quite sufficient for one who had lost much of his dexterity with the tiller, and at times the boat twisted on a white crest in imminent peril of rolling over. Worse than all, the waves which smote the flat stern commenced to splash on board, and the water inside the boat rose rapidly. Already the floorings were floating, and I dare not for a second loose the tiller. It was Lucille Haldane who solved the difficulty.

"Is not all that water getting dangerous?" she asked, with chattering teeth; and, knowing her keenness, I saw there was no use attempting to hide the fact.

"Why did you not tell me so earlier?" she continued. "It is only right that I should do my share, and I can at least throw some of it out."

"You are not fit for such work, and must sit still. At this pace we shall see the lights of Leyland's house soon," I said, tightening my hold upon her; but the girl shook off my grasp.

"I am not so helpless that I cannot make an effort to do what is so necessary," she said. "Let me go, Mr. Ormesby, or I shall never forgive you. Where is the bailer?"

I pointed to it, and even in face of the necessity it hurt me to see her alternately kneeling in the water that surged to and fro and trying to hold herself upright while she raised and emptied the heavy bucket. Often she upset its contents over herself or me, and several times a lurch flung her cruelly against the coaming; but she persevered with undiminished courage until she stumbled in a savage roll and struck her head. Then she clung to the coaming, the water draining from her, and not daring to move from the tiller I could do nothing but growl anathemas upon the boat's owner, until the girl sank down in the stern sheets beside me.

"I must rest a little," she said. "But whatever were you saying, Mr. Ormesby?"

"Only that I would like to hang the man who invented this unhandy rig, and Caryl for tempting you on board such a craft," I answered; hoping she had not heard the whole of my remarks. "You poor child, it is shameful that you should have to do such work; and, whatever happens, you shall not try again."

Her tresses, released from whatever bound them, streamed in the wind about her, and she seemed to shrink a little from me as she struggled with them. "It is not Caryl's fault. I clumsily let the rope go when I was pulling the boat in, and as it is some little time since I was a child, I do not care to be treated as one. Have I not done my best?" she said.

"You have done gallantly; more than many men unused to seamanship—Caryl, for instance, could. All this is due to his stupidity," I answered; and fancied there was a trace of resentment in her voice as she said: "Poor Ted! He is brave enough, at least. I know he cannot swim, and yet he was about to plunge into deep water when you stopped him."

It appeared wholly ridiculous, but, even then, Lucille Haldane's defence of Caryl irritated me. "He is responsible for all you are suffering, and I can't forgive him for it. Was that not rather the action of a lunatic?" I answered shortly.

A wave, which, breaking upon the flat stern, deluged my shoulders and drenched my companion afresh, cut short the colloquy; but I caught sight of a faint twinkle ahead, and restrained her with a wet hand when she would have resumed the bailing. It was also by gentle force, for this time she resisted, I drew her down beside me so that I partly shielded her from the spray, and the water came in as it willed as we drove onwards through thick obscurity. Still, the light rose higher ahead, and I strained my eyes to catch the first loom of Leyland's island. Large boulders studded the approach to it, and we might come to grief if we struck one of them.

It was now blowing viciously hard, the boat, half-buried in a white smother, would scarcely steer, and the bright light from a window ahead beat into my eyes, bewildering my vision. I could, however, dimly make out pines looming behind it, and the beat of yeasty surges, which warned me it would be risky to attempt a landing on that beach. There would be shelter on the leeward side of the island, but a glance at the balloon-like curves of the lifting mainsail showed that we could not clear its end upon the course we were sailing. We must jibe, or swing the mainsail over, which might result in a capsize.

"I want your help, Miss Haldane. Go forward and loose the rope you will find on your right hand side near the mast," I said; and as the girl obeyed, the light shone more fully upon the dripping boat. I had a momentary vision of several dark figures outlined against it on the veranda, and then, while I held my breath, saw only the slight form of the girl, with draggled dress and wet hair streaming, swung out above the whiteness of rushing foam as she wrenched at the halliard, which had fouled. Then the head of the sail swung down, and as she came back panting the steering demanded all my attention.

"Hold fast to the coaming here," I said, as, dragging with might and main at the sheet I put the tiller up.

The craft twisted upon her heel, the sail swung aloft, and then, while the sheet rasped through my fingers, chafing the skin from them, there was a heavy crash as the boom lurched over. The boat swayed wildly over under its impetus, buried one side deep, and a shout, which might have been a cry of consternation, reached me faintly. Then she shook herself free, and reeled away into the blackness on a different course.

The head of the island swept by, and we shot into smoother water with a spit of shingle ahead, on which I ran the craft ashore, while it was with sincere relief I felt the shock of her keel upon the bottom. Lucille Haldane said something I did not hear while she lay limp and wet and silent in my arms, as, floundering nearly waist-deep, I carried her ashore and then towards a path which led to the house. The night was black, the way uneven, but perhaps because I was partly dazed I did not set down my burden.

She had helped me bravely, and it was only now, when the peril had passed, I knew how horribly fearful I had been for her safety. Indeed, it was hard to realize she was yet free from danger, and in obedience to some unreasoning instinct I still held her fast, until she slipped from my grasp. A few minutes later a light twinkled among the trees, voices reached us, and Haldane, followed by several others, came up with a lantern.

He stooped and kissed his daughter, then turning, held out his hand to me. "Thank God!—but where is Beatrice?" he said.

I told him, my teeth rattling as I spoke, and without further words we went on towards the house. Nevertheless, the fervent hand-clasp and quiver in Haldane's voice were sufficiently eloquent. When we entered the house, where Mrs. Leyland took charge of the girl, Haldane, asking very few questions, looked hard at me. "I shall not forget this service," he said quietly. "In the meantime get into some of Leyland's things as quickly as you can. We are going to pull the boat ashore under shelter of the island and requisition a wagon at Rideau's farm. I believe we can reach the others by an old lumbermen's trail."

It was in vain I offered my services as guide. Haldane would not accept them, and set out with the assistants whom, fearing some accident, he had brought with him, while I had changed into dry clothing when his daughter came in. What she had put on I do not know, but it was probably something of Mrs. Leyland's, intended for evening wear; and, in contrast to her usual almost girlish attire, to my mind, at least, became her. She had changed as it were suddenly into a woman. Her dark lashes were demurely lowered, but her eyes were shining.

"You are none the worse," I said, drawing out a chair for her; and she laughed a little.

"None; and I even ventured to appear in this fashion lest you should think so. I also wanted to thank you for taking care of me."

Lucille Haldane's voice was low and very pleasant to listen to, but I wondered why I should feel such a thrill of pleasure as I heard it.

"Shouldn't it be the reverse? You deserve the thanks for the way you helped me, though I am sorry it was necessary you should do what you did. Let me see your hands," I said.

She tried to slip them out of sight, but I was too quick, and seizing one held it fast, feeling ashamed and sorry as I looked down on it. The hard wet ropes had torn the soft white skin, and the rim of the bucket or the coaming had left dark bruises upon them. Admiration, mingled with pity, forced me to add: "It was very cruel. I called you child. You are the bravest woman I ever met!"

The damask tinge deepened a little in either cheek, and she strove to draw the hand away, but I held it fast, continuing: "No man could have behaved more pluckily; but—out of curiosity—were you not just a little frightened?"

The lashes fell lower, and I was not sure of the smile beneath them. "I was, at first, horribly so; but not afterwards. I thought I could trust you to take care of me."

"I am afraid I seemed very brutal; but I would have given my life to keep you safe," I said. "That, however, would have been very little after all. It is not worth much just now to anybody."

I was ashamed of the speech afterwards, especially the latter part of it, but it was wholly involuntary, and the events of the past few hours had drawn, as it were, a bond of close comradeship between myself and my companion in peril.

"I think you are wrong, but am glad you have spoken, because I wanted to express my sympathy, and feared to intrude," she said. "We heard that bad times had overtaken you and your neighbors, and were very sorry. Still, they cannot last for ever, and you will not be beaten. You must not be, to justify the belief I and father have in you."

The words were very simple, but there was a naive sincerity about them which made them strangely comforting, while I noticed that Mrs. Leyland, who came in just then, looked at us curiously. I sat out upon the veranda until late that night, filled with a contentment I could not quite understand. To have rendered some assistance to Beatrice Haldane's sister and won her father's goodwill seemed, however, sufficient ground for satisfaction, and I decided that this must be the cause of it.

The rest of the party returned overland next day, and during the afternoon Haldane said to me: "I may as well admit that I have heard a little about your difficulties, and Leyland has been talking to me. If you don't mind the plain speaking, one might conclude that you are somewhat hardly pressed. Well, it seems to me that certain incidents have given me a right to advise or help you, and if you are disposed to let the mortgaged property go, I don't think there would be any great difficulty in finding an opening for you. There are big homesteads in your region financed by Eastern capital."

He spoke with sincerity and evident goodwill, but unfortunately Haldane was almost the last person I could accept a favor from. "I am, while grateful, not wholly defeated, and mean to hold on," I said. "Would you, for instance, quietly back out of a conflict with some wealthy combine and leave your opponents a free hand to collect the plunder?"

Haldane smiled drily. "It would depend upon circumstances; but in a general way I hardly think I should," he said. "You will, however, remember advice was mentioned, and I believe there are men who would value my counsel."

I shook my head. "Heaven knows what the end will be; but I must worry through this trouble my own way," I said.

Haldane was not offended, and did not seem surprised. "You may be wrong, or you may be right; but if you and your neighbors are as hard to plunder as you are slow to take a favor, the other gentlemen will probably earn all they get," he said. "I presume you have no objections to me wishing you good luck?"

It was the next evening when I met Beatrice Haldane beside the lake. "And so you are going back to-morrow to your cattle?" she said.

"Yes," I answered. "It is the one course open to me, and the only work I am fitted for." And Miss Haldane showed a faint trace of impatience.

"If you are sure that is so, you are wise," she said.

Before I could answer she moved away to greet Mrs. Leyland, and some time had elapsed when we met again, for I bade Leyland farewell next morning.

XII.

THE SELLING OF GASPARD'S TRAIL.

The surroundings were depressing when, one evening, Steel and I rode home for the last time to Gaspard's Trail. The still, clear weather, with white frost in the mornings and mellow sunshine all day long, which follows the harvest, had gone, and the prairie lay bleak and gray under a threatening sky waiting for the snow. Crescents and wedges of wild-fowl streaked the lowering heavens overhead as they fled southward in endless processions before the frost. The air throbbed with the beat of their pinions which, at that season, emphasizes the human shrinking from the winter, while the cold wind that shook the grasses sighed most mournfully.

There was nothing cheering in the prospect for a man who badly needed encouragement, and I smiled sardonically when Steel, who pushed his horse alongside me, said: "There's a good deal in the weather, and this mean kind has just melted the grit right out of me. I'll be mighty thankful to get in out of it, and curl up where it's warm and snug beside the stove. Sally will have all fixed up good and cheerful, and the west room's a cosy place to come into out of the cold."

"You must make the most of it to-night, then, for we'll be camping on straw or bare earth to-morrow," I said. "Confound you, Steel! Isn't it a little unnecessary to remind me of all that I have lost?"

"I didn't mean it that way," said the other with some confusion. "I felt I had to say something cheerful to rouse you up, and that was the best I could make of it. Any way, we'll both feel better after supper, and I'm hoping we'll see the man who turned you out in a tight place yet."

"You have certainly succeeded," I answered drily. "When one is forced to stand by and watch a rascal cheat him out of the result of years of labor you can't blame him for being a trifle short in temper, and if it was not for the last expectation you mention I'd turn my back to-morrow on this poverty-stricken country. As it is——"

"We'll stop right here until our turn comes some day. Then there'll be big trouble for somebody," said Steel. "But you've got to lie low, Ormesby, and give him no chances. That man takes every one he gets, and, if one might say it, you're just a little hot in the head."

"One's friends can say a good deal, and generally do," I answered testily. "How long have you set up as a model of discretion, Steel? Still, though there is rather more sense than usual in your advice, doesn't it strike you as a little superfluous, considering that Lane has left us no other possible course?"

Steel said nothing further, and I was in no mood for conversation. Gaspard's Trail was to be sold on the morrow, and Lane had carefully chosen his time. The commercial depression was keener than ever, and there is seldom any speculation in Western lands at that time of the year. It was evidently his purpose to buy my possessions in.

A cheerful red glow beat out through the windows of my dwelling when we topped the last rise, but the sight of it rather increased my moodiness, and it was in silence, and slowly, we rode up to the door of Gaspard's Trail. Sally Steel met us there, and her eyelids were slightly red; but there was a vindictive ring in her voice as she said: "Supper's ready, and I'm mighty glad you've come. This place seems lonesome. Besides, I'm 'most played out with talking, and I've done my best to-day. Those auctioneering fellows have fixed up everything, but it isn't my fault if they don't know how mean they are. They finished with the house in a hurry, and one of them said: 'I can't stand any more of that she-devil.' "

"He did! Where are they now?" asked Steel, dropping his horse's bridle and staring about him angrily; but after a glance at Sally, who answered my unspoken question with a nod, I seized him by the shoulder.

"Steady! Who is hot-headed now?" I said.

Steel strove to shake off my grasp until his sister, who laughed a little, turned towards him. "I just took it for a compliment, and there's no use for your interfering," she said. "I guess neither of them feels proud of himself to-night, and a cheerful row with somebody would just spoil all the good I've done. They're camping yonder in the stable, but you'll tie up the horses in the empty barn."

Sally Steel was a stanch partisan, and, knowing what I did of her command of language, I felt almost sorry for the men who had been exposed to it a whole day in what was, after all, only the execution of their duty. Before Steel returned one of them came out of the stable and approached me, but, catching sight of the damsel, stopped abruptly, and then, as though mustering his courage, came on again.

"I guess you're Mr. Ormesby, and I'm auctioneer's assistant," he said. "One could understand that you were sore a bit, but I can't see that it's my fault, any way; and from what we heard, you don't usually turn strangers into the stable."

The man spoke civilly enough, and I did not approve of his location; but the rising color in Sally's face would have convinced anybody who knew her that non-interference was the wisest policy.

"It is about the first time we have done so, but this lady manages my house, and if you don't like your quarters you must talk to her," I said.

The man cast such a glance of genuine pity upon me that it stirred me to faint amusement rather than resentment, while the snap, as we called it thereabouts, which crept into Sally's eyes usually presaged an explosion.

"If that's so I guess I prefer to stop just where I am," he said.

We consumed our supper almost in silence, and little was spoken afterwards. Sally did her best to rouse us, but even her conversation had lost its usual bite and sparkle, and presently she abandoned the attempt. I lounged in a hide chair beside the stove, and each object my eyes rested on stirred up memories that were painful now. The cluster of splendid wheat ears above the window had been the first sheared from a bounteous harvest which had raised great hopes. I had made the table with my own fingers, and brought out the chairs, with the crockery on the varnished shelf, from Winnipeg, one winter, when the preceding season's operations had warranted such reckless expenditure. The dusty elevator warrant pinned to the wall recalled the famous yield of grain which—because cattle had previously been our mainstay—had promised a new way to prosperity, and now, as I glanced at it, led me back through a sequence of failures to the brink of poverty. Also, bare and plain as it was, that room appeared palatial in comparison with the elongated sod hovel which must henceforward shelter us at Crane Valley.

The memories grew too bitter, and at last I went out into the darkness of a starless night to find little solace there. I had planned and helped to build the barns and stables which loomed about me with my own hands—denied myself even necessities that the work might be better done; and now, when, after years of effort and sordid economy, any prairie settler might be proud of them, all must pass for very much less than their value into a stranger's hands. Tempted by a dazzling possibility, I had staked too heavily and had lost, and there was little courage left in me to recommence again at the beginning when the hope which had hitherto nerved me was taken away. Steel and his sister had retired before I returned to the dwelling, and I was not sorry.

The next day broke gloomily with a threat of coming storm, but as it drew on all the male inhabitants of that district foregathered at Gaspard's Trail. They came in light wagons and buggies, and some on horseback, and I was touched by their sympathy. They did not all express it neatly. Indeed, the very silence of some was most eloquent; but there was no mistaking the significance of the deep murmur that went up when Lane and two men drove up in a light wagon. The former was dressed in city fashion in a great fur-trimmed coat, and his laugh grated upon me as he made some comment to the auctioneer beside him. Then the wagon was pulled up beside the rank of vehicles, and the spectators ceased their talking as, dismounting, he stood, jaunty, genial, and *débonair,* face to face with the assembly.

Even now the whole scene and its surroundings rises up before me—the threatening low-hung heavens, the desolate sweep of prairie, confused jumble of buildings, rows of wagons, and the intent, bronzed faces of the men in well-worn jean. All were unusually somber, but while a number expressed only aversion, something which might have been fear mingled with hatred stamped those of the rest. Every eye was fixed upon the little portly man in the fur coat who stood looking about him with much apparent good humor beside the wagon. Lane was not timid, or he would never have ventured there in person at all; but his smile faded as he met that concentrated gaze. Those who stared at him were for the most part determined men, and even with the power of the law behind him and two troopers in the background some slight embarrassment was not inexcusable.

"Good morning to you, boys. Glad to see so many of you, and I hope you'll pick up bargains to-day," he said; and then twisted one end of his mustache with a nervous movement; when again a growl went up. It was neither loud nor wholly articulate, though a few vivid epithets broke through it, and the rest was clearly not a blessing. Several of the nearest men also turned their backs upon the speaker with as much parade as possible.

"Don't seem quite pleased at something," he said to me. "Well, it don't greatly matter whether they're pleased or not. May as well get on to business. You've had your papers, and didn't find anything to kick against, Ormesby?"

"It is hardly worth while to ask, considering your experience of such affairs. The sooner you begin and finish the better I'll be pleased," I said.

The auctioneer's table had been set up in the open with the ticketed implements arranged behind it, and the stock and horses in the wire-fenced corral close beside. He was of good repute in his business, and I felt assured of fair play from him at least, though I could see Lane's purpose in bringing him out from Winnipeg. The latter was too clever to spoil a well-laid scheme by any superfluous petty trickery, and with that man to conduct it nobody could question the legitimacy of the sale. There was an expectant silence when he stood up behind his table.

"What is one man's gain is another man's loss, and I feel quite certain, from what I know of the prairie, that none of you would try to buy a neighbor's things way under their cost," he commenced. "It's mighty hard to make a fortune in times like these, you know, but anybody with sound judgment and the dollars handy has his opportunity right now. You're going to grow wheat and raise beef enough down here to feed the world some day. It's a great country, and the best bit in it you'll find scheduled with its rights and acreage as the first lot I have to offer you—the Gaspard's Trail holding with the buildings thereon. The soil, as you all know, will grow most anything you want if you scratch it, and the climate——"

"Needs a constitution of cast iron to withstand it," interjected a young and sickly Englishman, who had benefited less than he expected from a sojourn upon the prairie. His comment was followed by a query from another disappointed individual: "Say, what about the gophers?"

"I'm not selling you any climate," was the ready answer. "Even the gopher has its uses, for without some small disadvantages the fame of your prosperity would bring out all Europe here. Now, gentlemen, I'm offering you one of the finest homesteads upon the prairie. Soil of unequaled fertility, the best grass between Winnipeg and Calgary, with the practical certainty of a railroad bringing the stock cars to its door and the building of mills and elevators within a mile from this corral."

Here Lane, standing close to the table, whispered something—unobserved, he doubtless thought—to the auctioneer, whose genial face contracted into a frown. Lane had perhaps forgotten the latter was not one of the impecunious smaller fry who, it was suggested, occasionally accepted more than hints from him.

"The holder of the mortgage evidently considers that the railroad will not be built, and it is very good of him to say so—under the circumstances; but we all know what a disinterested person he is," continued the auctioneer; and the honest salesman had at least secured the crowd's goodwill. A roar of derisive laughter and appreciation of the quick-witted manner in which he had punished unjustified interference followed the sally. "That, after all, is one person's opinion only; and I heard from Ottawa that the road would be built. I want your best bids for the land and buildings, with the stock cars thrown in. You'll never get a better chance; but not all at once, gentlemen."

During the brief interval which followed I was conscious of quivering a little under the suspense. The property, if realized at normal value, should produce sufficient to discharge my liabilities several times over; but I dreaded greatly that, under existing conditions, a balance of debt would be left sufficient to give Lane a hold upon me when all was sold. The auctioneer's last request was also superfluous, for at first nobody appeared to have any intention of bidding at all, and there was an impressive hush while two men from the cities, who stood apart among the few strangers, whispered together. Meantime, I edged close in to the table so that I might watch every move of my adversary.

"Lane wasn't wise when he tried to play that man the way he did," said Steel, who stood beside me, but I scarcely heeded him, for Carson Haldane, who must have reached Bonaventure very recently, nodded to me as he took his seat in a chair Thorn brought him.

Then one of the strangers named a ridiculously small sum, which Steel, amid a burst of laughter from all those who knew the state of his finances, immediately doubled, whereupon the bidder advanced his offer by a hundred dollars.

"Another five hundred on to that!" cried Steel; and when my foreman Thorn followed his cue with a shout of, "I'll go three hundred better," the merriment grew boisterous. The spectators were strung up and uncertain in their mood. Very little, I could see, would rouse them to fierce anger, and perhaps for that reason any opening for mirth came as a relief to them. I had now drawn up close behind the table which formed the common centre for every man's attention, and scanning the faces about it saw Lane's darken when the stranger called out excitedly: "I'll raise him two hundred and fifty."

Lane rewarded Thorn with a vicious glance, and growled under his breath. Next he whispered something to the auctioneer, who disregarded it, while a few minutes later the bidder, holding his hand up for attention, said: "I withdraw my last offer. I came here to do solid business and not fool away my time competing with irresponsible parties who couldn't put up enough dollars to buy the chicken-house. Is this a square sale, Mr. Auctioneer, or is anybody without the means to purchase to be allowed to force up genuine buyers for the benefit of the vendor?"

"That's Lane's dummy, and I'm going to do some talking now," said Steel.

I was inclined to fancy that the usurer, perhaps believing there was no such thing as commercial honesty, had badly mistaken his man, or that the auctioneer, guided by his own quick wits, saw through his scheme, for he smote upon the table for attention.

"This is a square sale, so square that I can see by the vendor's looks he would sooner realize half-value than countenance anything irregular. I took it for granted that these gentlemen had the means to purchase as I did in your own case. No doubt you can all prove your financial ability."

"One of them is still in debt," added the bidder.

I had moved close behind Lane, and fancied I heard him say softly to himself: "I'll fix you so you'll be sorry for your little jokes by and by."

A diversion followed. Goodwill to myself, hatred of the usurer, and excitement may perhaps have prompted them equally, for after the would-be purchaser's challenge those of my neighbors who had escaped better than the rest clustered about Steel, who had hard work to record the rolls of paper money thrust upon him. Hardly had his rival laid down a capacious wallet upon the table than Steel deposited the whole beside it.

"I guess that ought to cover my call, and now I want to see the man who called me irresponsible quite close," he said. "That's enough to raise me, but to hint that any honest man would back up the thief of a mortgage holder is an insult to the prairie."

A roar of laughter and approval followed, but the laughter had an ominous ring in it; and I saw Sergeant Mackay, who had been sitting still as an equine statue in his saddle on the outskirts of the crowd, push his horse through the thickest of the shouting men. He called some by name, and bantered the rest; but there was a veiled warning behind his jest, and two other troopers following managed to further separate the groups. The hint was unmistakable, and the shouting died away, while, as the auctioneer looked at the money before him, the man who had been bidding glanced covertly at Lane.

"If you are satisfied with these gentlemen's good faith I'll let my offer stand," he said.

"It doesn't count for much whether he does or not," said Haldane languidly. "I'll raise him two hundred and fifty."

"I'm not satisfied with his," broke in the irrepressible Steel. "I can't leave my money lying round right under that man's hand, Mr. Auctioneer. No, sir; I won't feel easy until I've put it where it's safer. Besides, he called me a friend of the mortgage holder, and I'm waiting for an apology."

The stranger from the cities grew very red in face, and a fresh laugh, which was not all good humor, went up from the crowd; but as the auctioneer prepared to grapple with this new phase of affairs a man in uniform reined in a gray horse beside and looked down upon the speaker. There was a faint twinkle in his eyes, though the rest of his countenance was grim; and he laid a hard hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Ye'll just wait a while longer, Charlie Steel," he said. "I'm thinking ye will at least be held fully responsible for anything calculated to cause a breach of the peace."

Thereafter the bidding proceeded without interruption, Haldane and his rival advancing by fifties or hundreds of dollars, while, when the prarie syndicate's united treasury was exhausted, which happened very soon, a few other strangers joined in. Meantime, the suspense had grown almost insupportable to me. That I must lose disastrously was certain now, but I clung to the hope that I might still start at Crane Valley clear of debt. Haldane was bidding with manifest indifference, and at last he stopped.

The auctionerr, calling the price out, looked at him, but Carson Haldane shook his head, and said, with unusual distinctness: "The other gentlemen can have it. I have gone further than I consider justifiable already."

I saw Lane glance at him with a puzzled expression, and next moment try to signal the stranger, who was clearly in league with him, and fail in the attempt to attract his attention. Then I held my breath, for, after two more reluctant bids, there was only silence when the auctioneer repeated the last offer.

"Is there anyone willing to exceed this ridiculous figure? It's your last chance, gentlemen. Going, going——" And my hopes died out as he dropped the hammer.

"Nothing left but to make the best of it," said Steel; which was very poor consolation, for I could see nothing good at all in the whole affair.

There was much brisker bidding for the implements, working oxen, and remnant of the stock, which were within the limits of my neighbors, who did their best; but the prices realized were by comparison merely a drop in the bucket, and I turned away disconsolate, knowing that the worst I feared had come to pass. All the borrowed money had been sunk in the improvement of that property, and now the mortgage holder, who had even before the sale been almost repaid, owned the whole of it, land and improvements, and still held a lien on me for a balance of the debt.

Haldane met me presently, and his tone was cordial as he said: "Where are you thinking of spending the night?"

"At Crane Valley with the others," I answered shortly. "Steel and my foreman are going to help me to restart there."

"I want you to come over to Bonaventure for a few days instead," he said. "A little rest and change will brace you for the new campaign, and I am all alone, except for my youngest daughter."

I looked him squarely in the face, seeing that frankness was best. "My wits are not very keen to-day, and I am a little surprised," I said. "May I ask why you bid at all for my recent property? You must have known it was worth much more than your apparent limit."

Haldane smiled good-humoredly; but, in spite of this, his face was inscrutable. "'When I might at least have run the price up,' you wish to add. Well, I had to redeem a promise made somewhat against my better judgment, and I stopped—when it seemed advisable. This, as you may discover, Ormesby, is not the end of the affair, and if I could have helped you judiciously you may be sure that I would. In the meantime, are you coming back to Bonaventure with me?"

He had told me practically nothing, and yet I trusted him, while the knowledge that his daughter had bidden him take measures on my behalf was very soothing. After all, Beatrice Haldane had not forgotten me. "It is very kind of you, and I should be glad to do so, sir," I said.

I found Lane at the table as soon as the sale was over, and he held out a sheet of paper. "You can verify the totals at leisure, but you will see it leaves a balance due to me," he said. "It is rather a pity; but the new purchaser requires immediate possession, though he might allow you to use the house to-night. Ah! there he is to speak for himself."

The stranger, who endorsed the statement, looked first at Lane and then myself in sidelong fashion. There was nothing remarkable about him except that he had hardly the appearance of a practical farmer, but the malicious enjoyment his master's eyes expressed, and something in his voice, set my blood on fire. Indeed, I was in a fitting humor to turn upon my best friend just then.

"Nothing would induce me to enter a house which belonged to—you," I said, turning to Lane. "So far you have won hands down; but neither you nor your tool have quite consummated your victory. I shall see both of you sorry you ever laid your grasping hands upon this property."

"You may be right in one way," answered Lane. "You'll remember what happened to the fool bullfrog, and you're looking tolerably healthy yet."

I had hardly spoken than I regretted it. The words were useless and puerile, but my indignation demanded some outlet. In any case, Lane shrugged his shoulders and the other man grinned, while I had clearly spoken more loudly than I intended, for several bystanders applauded, and when I moved away Sergeant Mackay overtook me. "I'm surprised at ye, Rancher Ormesby," he said. "Ye have not shown your usual discretion."

"I would not change it for yours," I answered. "It is evidently insufficient to warn you that there are times when preaching becomes an impertinence."

Mackay only shook his head. He wheeled his horse, and with two troopers behind him rode toward the wagon which Lane was mounting. A deep growl of execration went up, and the farewell might have been warmer but for the troopers' presence. As it was, he turned and ironically saluted the sullenly wrathful crowd as the light wagon lurched away across the prairie. Then I was left homeless, and was glad to feel Haldane's touch upon my arm. "Light this cigar and jump in. The team is getting impatient, and Lucille will be wondering what has kept us so long," he said.

XIII.

AN UNFORTUNATE PROMISE.

HALDANE could command any man's attention when he chose to exert himself, and, I fancied, made a special effort on my behalf during his homeward journey. As a result of this I almost forgot that I was a homeless and practically ruined man as I listened to his shrewd predictions concerning the future of that region, or occasionally ventured to point out improbabilities in some of them. The depression, however, returned with double force when we came into sight of Bonaventure soon after dusk, and with it a curious reluctance to face the young mistress of the homestead.

Lucille Haldane was my junior by several years. Indeed, on our first meeting I had considered her little more than a girl, but since then a respect for her opinions and desire to retain her approval had been growing upon me. Perhaps it was because the said opinions more or less coincided with my own, but this fact would not account for the undeniable thrill of pleasure which had followed her naive announcement that she believed in me. Hitherto, with one exception, I had figured before her as a successful man, and I positively shrank from appearing as one badly beaten and brought down by his own over-confident folly. I remembered how she once said: "You must not disappoint us."

This seemed wholly absurd, but the worst bitterness I had yet experienced made itself felt when Haldane pulled up his team, and, pointing to a figure on the threshold of his homestead, said: "Lucille must have been getting impatient. She is looking out for us."

I allowed him to precede me by as long a space as possible while I lingered to assist the hired man waiting for the horses with a refractory buckle, and then it was with an effort I braced myself for the interview. Haldane had vanished into the house, but the slight graceful figure still waited upon the threshold, and I wondered with a strange anxiety what his daughter would say to me.

The question was promptly answered, for as I entered the hall, feeling horribly ashamed and with doubtless a very wooden face, Lucille Haldane held out both hands to me. Her manner was half-shy yet wholly compassionate, and I stood quite still a space comforted by the touch of the little soft fingers which I held fast within my own. Then she said very simply: "I am so sorry, but you will have better fortune yet."

A lamp hung close above us, and it was perhaps as well it did, for the relief which followed the quiet words that vibrated with sincerity was more inimical to rational behavior than the previous causeless hesitation. Lucille Haldane looked more girlish than ever and most bewitchingly pretty as, glancing up at me, partly startled by my fervent grasp, she drew her hands away. She seemed the incarnation of innocence, freshness, and gentle sympathy, and perhaps, as a result of the strain lately undergone, there came upon me an insane desire to stoop and kiss her as, or so at least it seemed, a brother might have done.

She may have grown suspicious, for feminine perceptions are keen, and though the movement was graceful and not precipitate, a distance of several feet divided us next moment, and we stood silent looking at one another, while my heart beat at what appeared double its usual rate.

"You have given me new hope, and those were the kindest words I have ever heard," I said. "I think you meant them."

Lucille Haldane's manner changed. The change was indefinite, but it existed, and it was with a smile she answered me. "Of course I did. One does not generally trouble to deceive their friends; and we are friends, are we not, Mr. Ormesby?"

"No one could desire a better, and I hope we shall always remain so," I answered, with an attempt at a bow; and the girl, turning, preceded me into the big central hall.

"What kept you so long, Ormesby? One could almost have fancied you had become possessed of an unusual bashfulness," asked Haldane when we came in; and I glanced apologetically at his daughter before I answered him:

"Something of the kind happened, and my excuse is that I had very little cause for self-confidence. Now, however, I am only ashamed of the hesitation."

"You deserve to be," said Haldane with a mock severity which veiled a certain pride. "Fortunately, the young mistress of Bonaventure atones for her father's shortcomings, and so long as she rules there will always be a welcome for anybody in adversity here, as well as the best we can give to harassed friends. It is a convenient arrangement, for while, according to my unsuccessful rivals, I grow rich by paralyzing industries and unscrupulous gambling upon the markets, Lucille assists me to run up a counter score by proxy."

The girl's face flushed a little, and it was pleasant to see the quick indignation sparkle in her eyes. "You never did anything unscrupulous, and I do not think we are very rich," she said.

One might have fancied that Haldane was gratified, though he smiled whimsically and turned in my direction as he answered: "The last assertion at least is true if it proves anything, for it is tolerably hard to acquire even a competence nowadays by strictly honest means, isn't it, Ormesby? You, however, do not know the inconvenience of having an uncomfortably elevated standard fixed for one to live up to, and I am seriously contemplating a reckless attack upon some national industry to prove its impossibility."

The girl's confidence in her father was supreme, for though this time she laughed, it was evident she did not believe a word of this. "It is well you are known by your actions and not your speeches," she said. "There are commercial combinations which deserve to be attacked. Why"—and her tone grew serious enough—"do you not crush the man or men who are doing so much mischief in our vicinity?"

Haldane looked at his daughter and then across at me, and, while slightly ironical good humor was stamped upon it, his face was a mask. There was more than one side to his character, and when it pleased him to be so there was nobody more inscrutable. "It is a rather extensive order, and men of that stamp are generally hard to crush," he said. "Still, if those mistaken doctors should conspire to forbid me more profitable employment I might perhaps make the attempt some day."

This was vague enough, but I felt that Haldane had intended the hint for me. There was no further reference to anything financial, for henceforward both my host and his daughter laid themselves out to help me to forget my troubles, and were so successful in this that I even wondered at myself. The troubles were certainly not far away, but the financier's anecdotes and his daughter's comments proved so entertaining that they diminished and melted into a somber background.

When Lucille left us Haldane sat chatting with me over his cigar, and at last said abruptly: "I dare say you wondered at my half-hearted action to-day?"

"I did, sir," I answered; and the financier nodded good-humoredly.

"There is nothing to equal plain speaking, Ormesby. When a man knows just what he wants and asks for it he stands the best chance of obtaining it, though I don't always act in accordance with the maxim myself. Well, I made a few bids somewhat against my better judgment because I had promised to, and then ceased because it seemed best to me that, since you could not hold it, Lane should acquire the property."

"I don't quite see the reason, sir. On the other hand, a stiff advance in prices would have meant a good deal to me," I said.

Haldane answered oracularly: "That gentleman's funds are not inexhaustible, and he already holds what one might call foreclosure options on a good deal of property. I would not be sorry to see him take hold of further land so long as it did not lie west of Gaspard's Trail. It is possible that he has, as we say in the vernacular, bitten off more than he can chew—considering the present scarcity of money. I would take heart if I were you, and hold on to Crane Valley whatever it costs you."

"Can't you speak a little more directly?" I asked.

Haldane shook his head. "I am not in a position to do so yet; but if surmises turn into certainties, I will some day. Meantime, are you open to train some of the Bonaventure colts, and look after my surplus stock on a profit division basis? I have more than my staff can handle."

"I should be very glad," I answered, seeing that while the offer was prompted by kindness it had also its commercial aspect. "But if there is anything going on, say, some plan for the exploitation of this district in opposition to Lane, can I not take my part in it?"

"I have heard of no such scheme; and if I had you could help it most by driving new straight furrows and raising further cattle," said Haldane with an enigmatical smile. "There are games which require a life-long experience from the men who would succeed in them; and, because Rome was not built in a day, perhaps you are wiser to stick to your ploughing, Ormesby. One gets used to the excitement of the other life, but the strain remains, and that is one reason why you see me at Bonaventure again."

My host's words encouraged me. It was true he had said very little, but that was always Haldane's way; and seeing he now desired to change the subject I followed his lead. "I hope your health is not failing you again, sir?" I said.

"Save for one weakness my general health is good enough," was the quiet answer. "Still, the weakness is there, and for the second time this year physicians have ordered an interval of quietness and leisure. One has to pay the penalty for even partial success, you know, and I am not so young or vigorous as I used to be."

"Then, if I may ask the question, why not abandon altogether an occupation which tries you, sir?"

Haldane smiled over his cigar, but a shadow crossed his face. "We are what the Almighty made us, Ormesby, and I suppose the restless gaming instinct was born in me. Even in my enforced leisure down here it is almost too strong for me, and I indulge in it on a minor scale by way of recreation. I can't sit down and quietly rust into useless inactivity. Further, while handling a good deal of money my private share is smaller than many folks suppose it, and I have my daughters' future to ensure. Both have been brought up to consider a certain amount of luxury as necessary."

I do not think the last words were intended as a hint, for had Haldane considered the latter necessary it is hardly likely I should have been welcomed so often at Bonaventure. In any case it would have been superfluous, for I had already faced the worst, and decided that Beatrice Haldane must remain what she had always been to me—an ideal to be worshipped in the abstract and at a distance. Strangest of all, once the knowledge was forced upon me I found it possible to accept the position with some degree of resignation. All this flashed through my mind as I looked into the wreaths of smoke; and then Haldane spoke.

"Have you come across that photographer fellow lately?"

"Not for some time. Do you wish to see him?" I answered, with a slightly puzzled air.

"I think I should like to"—and Haldane's voice changed from its reflective tone. "Do you know who he is, Ormesby?"

"I should hardly care to say without consulting him, sir," I answered; and Haldane laughed.

"You need not trouble, because I do. If you chance upon him tell him what I said. Getting late now, isn't it? Good-night to you!"

He left me equally relieved and mystified, and that I should feel any relief at all formed part of the mystery. Whatever was the cause of it, I was neither utterly cast down nor desperate when I sought my couch, and managed to sleep soundly.

That was the first of several visits to Bonaventure. The acreage of Crane Valley was ample, but the house a mere elongated sod hovel, of which Miss Steel monopolized the greater portion, although I reflected grimly that under existing circumstances it was quite good enough for me. Our life there was dreary enough, and I grew tired at times of Sally's alternate blandishments and railleries; so, when the frost bound fast the sod and but little could be done for land and cattle, it was very pleasant to spend a few days amid the refinement and comfort which ruled at Bonaventure. During one of my journeys there I met Cotton, and rode some distance with him across the prairie. I could see there was something he wished to say, but his usually ample confidence seemed to fail him, and finally he bade me farewell with visible hesitation where our ways parted. I had, however, scarcely resumed my journey before he hailed me, and when I checked my horse rode back in my direction with resolve and irresolution mingled in his face.

"You are in a great hurry. There was something I wanted to ask," he commenced. "Do you think this frost will hold, Ormesby?"

"You have a barometer in the station, haven't you?" I answered, regarding him ironically. "Cotton, you have something on your mind to-day, and it is not the frost. Out with it, man. I'm in no way dangerous."

"I have," he answered, with a slight darkening of the bronze in his face. "It is not a great thing, but your paternal advice and cheap witticisms pall on me now and then. Curious way to ask a favor, isn't it? But that is just what I am going to do."

"We'll omit the compliments. Come to the point," I said; and the trooper made the plunge he had so hesitated over.

"I want you to ride out Wednesday night and meet freighter Walker coming in from the rail. As you know, he generally travels all night by the Bitter Lakes trail. Ask him for a packet with my name on the label, then tear that label off and give mail-carrier Steve the packet addressed to Miss Haldane. Those confounded folks at the rail post-office chatter so about every trifle, and Steve is too thick in the head to notice anything. My rounds make it quite impossible for me to go myself, and that fool of a freighter would certainly lose or smash the thing before he passed our way on his return journey. It is not too much, is it?"

"No," I said readily, seeing the eagerness in the trooper's eyes, though that statement implied a long cold night's ride. "Miss Haldane is, however, in Ottawa."

"I don't care where she is," said Cotton. "Confound—of course I mean it's very good of you; but there's no use of assuming stupidity. It is Miss Lucille Haldane I mean, you know."

"I might certainly have guessed it," I said drily. "It is no business of mine, Cotton, but in return for your compliments I can't help asking, do you think Haldane would appreciate it?"

Cotton straightened himself in his saddle, and I was sorry for him. He looked very young with that light in his eyes, and the hot blood showing through his tan. Also, I fancied, very chivalrous.

"Don't be under any misapprehensions, Ormesby," he said quietly. "That packet merely contains an article I heard Miss Haldane lamenting that she could not obtain. It is of no value, only useful; but Thursday is her birthday, and I think she would be pleased to have it. Being Trooper Cotton I should never have presumed to send a costly present, and you do not for a moment suppose Miss Lucille would appreciate the trifle for anything beyond its intrinsic utility. This is the second time you have forced me to point out the absurdity of your conclusions."

I was angry with him both for his infatuation and obtuseness, for it struck me that under the circumstances the simple gift was made in a dangerously graceful fashion, and calculated to appeal to a young woman's sympathies. "I can't offer you advice?" I said.

"No," was the answer. "One might surmise that you needed all your abilities in that direction for yourself. Still, to prevent your drawing any unwarranted inference, I may repeat that it would be quite unnecessary."

"I understand," I said somberly, feeling that there were two of us in the same position. "Very glad to oblige you. The times are out of joint for all of us just now, Cotton. Good-night—and, upon consideration, I think the frost will hold."

We rode in different directions, and because I had made that unfortunate promise it was late on the Wednesday night when I prepared to leave Bonaventure quietly. Haldane had journeyed to the railroad and could not return before midnight at earliest. Lucille informed me that she would be busy with some household affairs, and as I could be back by morning it seemed possible that neither would miss me. Having promised the trooper secrecy I did not wish to answer questions or frame excuses.

As ill-luck would have it the last person I desired to meet chanced upon me as, well wrapped in furs, I was slipping towards the door, and I must have looked confused when Lucille Haldane said: "Where-ever are you going, Mr. Ormesby?"

"A little ride," I answered. "I have—I have some business to do, and after two idle days begin to long for exercise."

The girl looked hard at me, and I saw recognized that the excuse was very lame. "There is nobody living within reach of a short ride. Will you return to-night?" she asked.

It was most unfortunate, for I did not wish to anticipate the trooper's gift. "I hardly think so," I answered. "Now I will make a bargain with you.

If you will keep my departure a secret you will discover what my errand is very shortly."

"Very well," said Lucille Haldane; though she still seemed curious. "A safe journey to you, but I don't envy your exercise."

I had afterwards cause to abuse Trooper Cotton and his errand, but I swung myself into the saddle, and when I reached it patrolled Bitter Lakes trail for two long hours under the nipping frost. No lumbering ox-team, however, crawled up out of the white prairie, though as yet the moon was in the sky, and I decided that the freighter had, as he sometimes did, taken another trail. It then, unfortunately, occurred to me that I had promised to inspect some horse with a small rancher living four or five leagues away, and determined to do so in the morning. A deserted sod-house stood at no great distance, which the scattered settlers kept supplied with fuel. It served as a convenient half-way shelter for those who must break their long journey to the railroad settlement, and I set out for it at a canter. As I did so the moon dipped, and darkness settled upon the prairie.

XIV.

THE BURNING OF GASPARD'S TRAIL.

THE hole in the roof of the sod-house had been insufficiently stopped, the green birch billets stored in a corner burned sulkily in the rusty stove, so that the earth-floored room was bitterly cold. Still, after making my horse fast at one end of it, and partly burying myself in a heap of prairie hay, I managed to sink into a slight slumber. I awakened feeling numbed all through, with the pain at the joints which results from sleeping insufficiently protected under a low temperature, and looked about me shivering. There was not a spark in the stove, the horse was stamping impatiently, and when a sputtering match had shown me that it was after two in the morning, I rose stiffly. Anything appeared better than slowly freezing there, and I strode out into the night, leading the horse by the bridle.

A cold wind swept the prairie, and it was very dark; and when we had covered a league or so, and the exercise had warmed me, a dull red glare appeared upon the horizon. A grass fire was out of the question at that season, and it was evident that somebody's homestead was burning. I was in the saddle next moment and riding fast towards the distant blaze. The frozen sod was rough, the night very black, and haste distinctly imprudent; but I pressed on recklessly, haunted by a fear that the scene of the conflagration was Bonaventure. Reaching the edge of a rise I pulled the horse up with a sense of vast relief, for a straggling birch bluff gave me my bearings and made it plain that neither Haldane's homestead nor his daughter could be in peril.

Then it dawned upon me that the fire was at Gaspard's Trail, and I sat still a minute, irresolute. I had no doubt that the recent purchaser was merely acting for Lane, and felt tempted to resume my journey, but curiosity, or the instinct which calls out each prairie settler when his neighbor's possessions are in jeopardy, was too strong for me, and I rode towards the blaze, but much more slowly. It was one thing to risk a broken limb when danger appeared to threaten Bonaventure, but quite another to do so for the sake of an unscrupulous adversary. It would also have been well for me had I obeyed the first impulse which prompted me—and turned my back upon the fire.

An hour had passed before I reached the house which had once been mine, and after tethering the horse in shelter of an unthreatened granary, proceeded to look about me. Gaspard's Trail was clearly doomed. One end of the dwelling had fallen in. The logs, dried by the fierce summer, were blazing like a furnace, and a column of fire roared aloft into the blackness of the night. Showers of sparks drove down wind, barns and stables were wrapped in smoke; but although the blaze lighted up the space about them there was nobody visible. This was in one respect not surprising because the nearest homestead stood a long distance away, but as the new owner had an assistant living with him I wondered what had become of them. From the position of the doors and windows they could have had no difficulty in escaping, so, deciding that if the ostensible proprietor had deserted his property I was not called upon to burn myself, I proceeded to prowl about the buildings in case he was sheltering inside one of them.

Finally I ran up against him carrying an armful of tools out of a shed, and he dropped them at the sight of me. "Hallo! Where did you spring from? Blamed hard luck, isn't it?" said he.

Niven, for this was his name, did not appear greatly disconcerted, or was able to face his loss with enviable tranquility. He was a lanky, thin-faced man, with cunning eyes, and I did not like the way he looked at me.

"I was out on the prairie and saw the blaze. Where's your hired man; and is there nothing better worth saving than these?" I said.

"I haven't seen Wilkins since he woke me up," was the answer. "He shouted that the place was burning, and he'd run the horses out of the stable and on to the prairie while I hunted up odd valuables and dressed myself. Must have done it and ridden off for help to the nearest ranch, for I haven't seen him since. Fire had got too good a hold for us to put it out."

If I had hitherto entertained any doubts as to the ownership of Gaspard's Trail, the speaker's manner would have dissipated them. No man would, under the circumstances, have wasted time in speech as he seemed willing to do had his own property been in danger; and the sight of the homestead I had spent the best years of my life in building up burning without an effort being made to save it filled me with indignation.

"You're the man who used to own this place, aren't you?" asked Niven, with a sidelong glance. "Should have thought you would have had enough of it; but you might as well help heave these things out, now you're here."

The question was innocent, if unnecessary, for I had spoken to him at the sale; but the manner in which he put it made me long to assault him, and I answered wrathfully: "I'll see you and your master burned before I move a hand!"

"I'm my own master, worse luck!" said the other coolly, before he commenced to gather up his load; and then turned again as another man came up breathless.

"Is that you, Ormesby? Come to see the last of it?" he said; and I saw that the newcomer was Boone, or Adams, the photographer.

"I don't quite know what I came for," I answered. "Probably out of curiosity. It's too late to save anything, even if there was more water than there used to be in the well."

Boone nodded as he glanced towards the house. It was burning more fiercely than ever. The straw roof of the stable, which stood not far away, was also well alight, while we could scarcely hear each other's voices through the crackle of blazing logs and the roaring of the flame. It was moodily I watched it toss and tower, now straight aloft, now hurled earthwards by the wind in bewildering magnificence After many a hard day's toil I had robbed myself of much needed sleep to fashion what the pitiless fire devoured, and it seemed as though I had given my blood to feed the flame, and that the hopes which had nerved me had dissipated like its smoke. "I can guess what you're feeling, but a bad failure is sometimes the best way to success. You will get over it," said Boone.

I was grateful, but did not answer him, for just then a rattle of wheels broke through the roar of the conflagration and two jolting wagons lurched into the glare. Black figures on horseback followed, and a breathless man ran up. "Trooper came round and warned us, and there's more behind. Looks as if we'd come too late," he said.

We formed the centre of an excited group in a few more minutes, for Niven had joined us, and when he had answered some of the many questions, asked one in turn. "It was my man Wilkins warned you?"

"I guess not," was the answer. "Trooper Chapleau saw the blaze on his rounds," and when the others had stated how the news had been passed on to them the new owner said: "Then where in the name of thunder has the fool gone?"

A swift suspicion flashed upon me, and I glanced at Adams; but his face was serene enough, while, when the question remained unanswered, another thought struck me. "Did you see him lead the horses out?" I asked.

"No," was the answer. "He was good at handling beasts, and I was way too busy to worry about him. Must have done it long ago. I made sure he'd lit out to ask for assistance, when I saw the door had swung to."

I twisted round on my heel. "Who's coming with me to the stable, boys?" I said.

The men looked at me and then at the fire. The stable was built of the stoutest logs obtainable, packed with sod, and its roof of branches, sod, and straw piled several feet thick to keep out the frost. A wind-driven blaze eddied about one end of it, but the rest of the low edifice appeared uninjured so far as we could see it through the smoke. The glare beat upon the weather-darkened faces of the spectators, which glowed like burnished copper under it; but if devoid of malicious satisfaction I thought I could read a resolve not to interfere stamped upon most of them.

"There's nothing of yours inside, and this fellow says the teams are clear," said one. "A bigger fire wouldn't stop us if the place was Ormesby's; but when the man who allows he owns it does nothing I'll not stir a finger to pull out a few forks and pails for that black thief Lane."

His comrades nodded, and another man said: "It's justice. Boys, you'll remember the night we brought Redmond home?"

I knew the first speaker's statement was true enough. One and all would have freely risked their lives to assist even a stranger who had dealt fairly with them; but they were stubborn men, unused to oppression, and recent events had aroused all the slow vindictiveness which lurked within them. I also felt very much as they did myself; but, remembering something, was not quite certain that the teams were out of the stable, and the dumb beasts had served me well. Before I could speak a police trooper came up at a gallop. "Hallo! What are you gaping at? Can't you stir round and pull anything clear of harm's way, boys?" he shouted.

"We're not a Montreal fire brigade, and I forgot my big helmet," said one.

"Not a stir," interjected another. "We'd pull the very sod up off the corral if you'd run Lane in for wholesale robbery," added a third; and it was not until the hoarse laugh which followed died away I found my opportunity.

"I'm afraid the horses are inside there, boys," I said. "It's not their fault they belong to Lane, and whether you come along or not I'm going to liberate them."

There was a change in a moment. I never saw even the most unfortunate settler ill-use his beast, though all young plough oxen and half-broken broncos, besides a good many old ones, are sufficiently exasperating. "Ormesby's talking now," said somebody; and there was an approving chorus. "Get the poor brutes clear, any way. Come right along." Then I started for the stable at a run, with the rest of the company hard behind me.

Thick smoke rolled between us and the door, and when he halted just clear of the worst of it a bright blaze shot up from the thatch. The heat scorched our faces, and one or two gave back with heads averted; but the sound of a confused trampling reached us from the building. "We've got to get in before the poor brutes are roasted, and do it mighty smartly," said somebody.

That at least was evident; but the question how it was to be accomplished remained, for I recoiled, blinded and choking, at the first attempt, before I even reached the door. I had framed it, with my own hands, of stout tenoned logs so that it would fit tightly to keep out the frost. One of the posts loosened by the fire had also settled, apparently since the last person entered the building. Another man went with me the second time, but though we managed to reach the handle the door remained immovable, and once more we reeled back beaten when a strip of blazing thatch fell almost upon our heads. Because the roof fed it the fire was mostly on the outside of the building.

"Solid as a rock," gasped my companion. "Say, somebody find a lariat and we'll heave her out by the roots."

A rope was found, and with difficulty hitched about the handle, after which a dozen strong men grasped the slack of it. A glance at their faces, illumined by the glare, showed that the thought of the suffering beasts had roused them, and they were in earnest now. There was a heave of brawny shoulders, a straining of sinewy limbs, and the line of bodies swayed backwards as one, when a voice rose up: "All together. Heave your best!"

I felt the straining hemp contract within my grasp. Trampling feet clawed for a firmer hold on the frozen sod, and I could hear the men behind me panting heavily. The door remained fast, however, and again a breathless voice encouraged us: "This time does it. Out she comes!"

The rope creaked, the trampling increased, and a man behind kicked me cruelly on the ankle during his efforts; but instead of the jammed door its handle came out, and next moment we went down together in one struggling heap, while before I could rise an unknown individual unwittingly stamped upon several tender portions of my frame. "There was a good birch log by the granary. We'll use it for a ram," I gasped.

Two men brought up the log, which was unusually long and heavy for that region where the stoutest trees are small, and Boone and I staggered with the butt of it into the smoke. The rest grasped the thinner end, swung it back, and drove the other forward with all the impetus they could furnish. The door creaked, but the most manifest result was the fall of a further strip of burning thatch upon us.

"We must manage this time," spluttered Boone. "If we once let go it will be too late before anyone else takes hold again."

Once more the door defied us. The heat was almost stifling, the smoke thicker than ever; but choking, panting, and dripping with perspiration, we managed to swing and guide the end of the log until the battered frame went down with a crash, and we two reeled over into the building. The fire which traveled along the roof had eaten a portion out, but though one strip of the interior was flooded with lurid light the smoke of a burning hay pile rolled about the rest. A horse was squealing in agony, one stall partition had been wrenched away, and another kicked to pieces, while two panic-stricken brutes blundered about the building. The rest were plunging and straining at their tethers, and there was a curious look in Boone's face as he turned to me.

"Somebody will risk being kicked to death before we get them out. I wish we could give their owner the first chance," he said.

Several of the agonized beasts had been in times of loneliness almost as human friends to me. Others had, in their own dumb faithful way, helped me to realize my first ambitions, and the sight of their suffering turned me savage. "Do you know anything of this?" I asked.

Boone wheeled round upon me with a menace in his eyes, but apparently mastering his temper with an effort laughed pleasantly. "No. Take care you are not asked the same question. Are you disposed to let the horses roast while we quarrel?"

The latter at least was out of the question, and I had only paused to gather breath and consider a plan of operations, for it is by no means easy to extricate frantic beasts from a burning building. The others were meantime gathering round, and we set about it as best we could. At times thick smoke wreaths blew into our eyes, the heat grew insupportable, and the first horse I freed would have seized me with his teeth but that I smote it hard upon the nostrils. Two men were knocked down and trampled on, another badly kicked, but amid an indescribable confusion the task was accomplished, until only one horribly burned horse, and another with a broken leg, remained inside the building.

"We can't leave them to grill," I said. "Thorn used to keep an old shot-gun inside the chop-chest lid."

It was Boone who brought me the weapon, and the burnt horse was quickly put out of its misery; but a portion of the roof fell in as I ran towards the other. This one lay still, and, I saw, recognized me. It had also carried me gallantly on many a weary ride, and was the one Lucille Haldane had leapt across the fence. I felt like a murderer when it turned its eyes upon me with an almost human appeal, for all that I could do was to press the deadly muzzle against its head. The shock of the detonation shook down a shower of blazing fragments, and I had turned away with a horrible sense of guilt, when somebody shouted, "There's a man in the end stall!"

The stall was hidden by the smoke, but, now the emptied stable was quieter, a voice reached us faintly through the vapor: "Won't anyone take me out of this?"

Several of us made a rush in that direction; but, so far as memory serves, only Boone and I reached the stall, and groping round it blindly came upon something which resembled a human form. We lifted it between us, and the man both groaned and swore, then staggering through the vapor came blackened, burnt a little, and half-asphyxiated, into the open. The rest were already outside, and, when we laid down our burden, stood about him panting.

"You've nearly killed me between you, boys, but it wasn't your fault," he gasped. "Horse fell over me when I tried to turn him loose." The half-articulate words which followed suspiciously suggested that the sufferer was cursing somebody, and I caught the name of Lane before he lapsed into semi-consciousness.

"It's pretty simple," one of the onlookers said. "The way Ormesby fixed it that door shut itself. He got some bones smashed, and was turned half-silly by the shock. Couldn't make us hear him even if he had sense enough. My place is the nearest, and I'll take him along."

I next heard my name called softly, and saw Boone standing apart from the rest. "I want to ask why you spoke as you did a little while ago?" he said.

"I did not stop to reflect just then, but I'll hear your explanation if you care to volunteer one before I apologize," I said.

"I was camped under a bluff with the wagon when I saw the blaze, and as the distance was not great came in on foot," was the answer. "That is the simple truth. Do you believe it?"

"Yes," I said, for his manner impressed me. "In return you also hinted something."

"I was giving you a warning," said Boone. "You are dealing with a dangerous man, and can't you see that if there is any doubt concerning the fire's origin a charge might be worked up against you? Be careful what you say; but as I see the sergeant yonder you need not mention my presence unless it is necessary."

I alluded to Haldane's desire to see him, and, when he vanished, followed the rest into the presence of Sergeant Mackay, who, ubiquitous as usual, had appeared mysteriously. He sat, with slightly compressed lips, motionless in his saddle, though his keen eyes moved along the encircling faces. It was evident that he was making an official inquiry, and the owner of the homestead was speaking.

"My name is Niven, late of the Brandon district, and I purchased this property recently," he said.

"Any partners?" asked the sergeant; and I noticed a gleam of what appeared malicious satisfaction on the other's face as he answered: "No. You will find my name recorded as sole owner. All was right when I turned in about 10 P.M., but I didn't notice the time when my hired man Wilkins roused me to say the house was burning. Had too much to think about. Can't suggest any cause for the fire, and it doesn't count much, any way, for the result is certain. House and stable burnt out—and all uninsured."

"Had ye any other hired man than Wilkins?" interposed the sergeant; and Niven answered: "No. Stable didn't seem to be burning when I first got up, but Wilkins said it was swept by sparks and he'd get the horses out. One of them must have knocked him down, as he was only found at the last minute."

"Who was the first man ye met when ye went out?" asked the sergeant.

"My predecessor—Ormesby," said Niven.

Mackay appeared to meditate before he spoke again: "Where did ye meet him, and what did he say?"

"Slipping round the corner of a shed, and he said he'd see me burnt before he stirred a hand to help," was the prompt answer. Then Mackay questioned several others before he turned to me.

"How did you happen to come to Gaspard's Trail, Henry Ormesby?"

"I was riding out from Bonaventure to intercept the freighter and saw the blaze," I answered indignantly. "I certainly refused to help Niven at first, for I had little cause for goodwill towards him or the man behind him; but afterwards saved most of his working beasts."

There was a murmur of assent from the bystanders, but the sergeant, disregarding it, spoke again. "Did ye meet the freighter?"

"No," I said bluntly.

Mackay smiled. "Ye did not. I passed him an hour gone by on the Buffalo trail. What was your business with him?"

"To ask him for a package."

"All that should be easily corroborated," was the answer; and I was glad that the examination was over, for, remembering Boone's warning, it appeared that my answers might give rise to unpleasant suspicions. It also struck me that, in the hurry and confusion, nobody had noticed him or remembered it if they had done so, while, somewhat strange to say, after the last brief interview I had full confidence in his statement that he knew nothing about the origin of the fire.

"I'm thinking that will do in the meantime. Chapleau, ye'll ride to the depot and wire for a surgeon. Now, boys, are any of ye willing to take Niven home?" said Mackay.

Apparently none of them were willing, though at last two offers were reluctantly made. It was the only time I ever saw the prairie settlers deficient in hospitality; but the man's conduct had confirmed their suspicions as to his connections with Lane, which was sufficient to prejudice the most generous. "Maybe he would be comfortable if I took him along with me," Mackay said drily.

Thereupon the assembly broke up, and I rode back to Bonaventure, reaching it with the first of the daylight, blackened and singed, while, as it happened, Lucille Haldane was the first person I met. "Where ever have you been? Your clothes are all burnt!" she said.

"Gaspard's Trail is burned down and I helped to save some of the horses," I answered wearily; and never forgot the first startled look the girl cast upon me. She appeared struck with sudden consternation. It vanished in a moment, and, though she looked almost guilty, her answer was reassuring.

"Of course; that is just what you would do. But you are tired and must rest before you tell me about it."

I was very tired, and slept until noon, when I told my story to Haldane and his daughter together. The former made very few comments, but presently I came upon Lucille alone, and laid my hand upon her shoulder as I said: "Do you know that somebody suggested it was I who burned Gaspard's Trail?"

The girl's color came and went under my gaze; then she lifted her head and met it directly. "I—I was afraid you might be suspected, and for just a moment or two, when you first came in looking like a ghost, did not know what to think," she said. "But it was only because you startled me so."

"I would not like to think that you could believe evil against me," I said; and Lucille drew herself up a little. "Do not be ungenerous. As soon as I could reason clearly I knew it was quite—quite impossible."

"I hope any work of that kind is," I said; and Lucille Haldane, turning suddenly, left me.

XV.

BEAUTY IN DISGUISE.

WINTER passed very monotonously with us in the sod-house at Crane Valley. When the season's work is over and the prairie bound fast by iron frost, the man whom it has prospered spends his well-earned leisure visiting his neighbors or lounging contentedly beside the stove; but those oppressed by anxieties find the compulsory idleness irksome, and I counted the days until we could commence again in the spring. The goodwill of my neighbors made this possible, for one promised seed-wheat, to be paid for when harvest was gathered in; another placed surplus stock under my charge on an agreement to share the resultant profit, while Haldane sent a large draft of young horses and cattle he had hardly hands enough to care for under a similar arrangement.

I accepted these offers the more readily because, while prompted by kindness, the advantages were tolerably equal to all concerned. So the future looked slightly brighter, and I hoped that better times would come if we could hold out sufficiently long. The debt I still owed Lane, however, hung as a menace over me, while although—doubtless because it suited him—he did not press me for payment, the extortionate interest was adding to it horribly. There were other men similarly circumstanced thereabouts, and at times we conferred together as to the best means of mutual protection.

Meantime the fire at Gaspard's Trail was almost forgotten, or so, at least, it seemed. Haldane, much against his wishes, spent most of the winter at Bonaventure, but his eldest daughter remained in Montreal. Boone, the photographer, appeared but once and spent the night with us. He looked less like the average Englishman than ever, for frost and snow-blink had darkened his skin to the Indian's color, and when supper was over I watched him languidly as we lounged smoking about the stove. Sally Steel managed to render the sod-house not only habitable but comfortable in a homely way, and though she ruled us all in a somewhat tyrannical fashion, it was for our good, she said.

"There's a little favor I want to ask you, Ormesby, but I suppose you are all in each other's confidence?" said Boone.

"Yes," I answered. "We are all, in one sense, partners, with a capital of about ten dollars between us, and further united by the fear of a common enemy."

Boone laughed silently, though his face was a trifle sardonic. "That is as it should be, and you may have an opportunity of proving the strength of the combination before very long. I have, as I once told you, a weakness for horses and cattle, and couldn't resist purchasing some at a bargain a little while ago. I want you to take charge of them for me. Here are particulars, and my idea of an equitable agreement." He laid a paper upon the table, which I glanced through. The conditions were those usual in arrangements of the kind, which were not then uncommon, but though cattle and horses were lamentably cheap, they could not be obtained for nothing, and the total value surprised me.

"We are as honest as most folks down this way, and take each other's word without any use for spilling ink," observed the irrepressible Sally.

"I once heard of a grasping storekeeper being badly beaten over a deal in butter by a clever young lady," said Boone; and Steel laughed, while his sister frowned.

"He deserved it; but you seem to know just everything," she said.

"Some folks are born clever, and some handsome; but it is really not my fault," said Boone, with a smile at Sally. "For instance, I know what Ormesby is thinking. He is wondering where I got the money to buy those beasts with."

The laugh was against me, but I answered frankly: "That was in my thoughts; but I also wondered what I had done to merit the trouble you had taken to do me a kindness."

"Don't flatter yourself," said Boone. "It is a matter of business, and equally possible I wished to do some other person the opposite. You must also decide to-night, because I have a new assortment of beautifiers and cosmetics in my wagon which I must set about vending to-morrow. They would not, of course, be of any use to Miss Sally, but I am going on to the Swedish settlement where the poor folks need them."

It was not delicate flattery, but Boone was quick at judging his listener's capacity, and it pleased Miss Steel, the more because a certain Scandinavian damsel was her principal rival in the question of comeliness. She drew herself up a little, while Boone smiled whimsically. "You know it is true," he said.

The man had always interested me. He was at home anywhere, and his tongue equally adept at broad prairie raillery or finely modulated English. Yet one could see that there was a shadow upon him.

"You need have no compunction, Ormesby. I really only made one successful attempt at housebreaking in my life," he said. "Do you accept the offer?"

"Yes, with many thanks; though I don't quite see why you make it in writing," I said. "There are, however, a good many other things I don't comprehend just now, and sometimes feel I am being moved here and there blindly to suit other persons' unknown purposes. The position does not please me."

Boone laughed. "There is something in the fancy. You are the king's bishop, and I'm not sure that as yet even the players quite know their own game. Of course you are aware that Lane holds a power of attachment against you?"

"At present there is nothing but the prairie sod to attach, though I don't see why he does not at once grab as much as he is entitled to of that," I said. "If I get so much time I may be able to pay him off after harvest."

"I hope you will," was Boone's answer; and, changing the topic, he entertained us with the quaintest anecdotes.

Some time had passed since that evening, and spring had come suddenly, when I commenced my ploughing. Little wheat had been grown so far west hitherto, but the soil was good, and I knew that sooner or later there would be grain elevators in the

Crane Valley. Though the sub-soil was still frozen the black clods that curled in long waves from the mould-board's slide were steaming under the April sun, and as I tramped down the quarter-mile furrow my spirits rose with the freshness of the spring. It was good to be up and doing again, and the coming months of strain and effort would help me to forget. Thorn and Steel, who were also ploughing, shouted jests as they passed, and it was with a contentment strange to us, for long we rested at noon. Some distance divided the breaking from the house, and we lay on the warm grasses basking in the radiance of the cloudless sun over our simple meal.

The whole prairie was flooded with it, the air sweet and warm, and we recommenced our task with pulses which throbbed in unison with that of re-awakening nature. The long months of darkness and death-like cold had gone, green blades presaging the golden ears would soon shoot upwards from every furrow, and one drank in the essence of hope eternal in every breath of air. Anxiety faded into insignificance, and one rejoiced in the mere possession of physical strength, while the tender greenness chequering the frost-nipped sod testified again that seed time and harvest should not fail so long as the world rolled onwards from darkness into light.

We came home more cheerful than we had been for months, but I felt an instinctive foreboding when I saw Cotton talking to Sally beside the corral fence. She was apparently bantering him, but there was satisfaction in his face, as, after some jests of hers, he glanced at the stripes upon his arm.

"I guess he's most too proud to look at you. They've made him a corporal!" said Sally.

There was a contrast between us. Spring ploughing is not cleanly work, and the mire which clung about our leggings had also freely spattered our old jean overalls. Cotton was immaculate in new uniform, and sat, a trim soldierly figure, on his freshly caparisoned horse.

"Here is a note for you from Bonaventure," he said. "I was riding in to the railroad with some dispatches and to bring out our pay when Miss Haldane asked me to give it you."

I saw a faint sparkle in Sally's eyes at the mention of Bonaventure, as I said: "It was very good of you to ride so far round. Your superiors are punctilious, are they not?"

"With the exception of Mackay, who's away, they don't leave one much discretion," said the corporal. "Still, I have time to spare, and don't suppose anybody will be much the wiser. In any case, Miss Haldane said the note was urgent, and—though having to call at the reservation I might have passed this way on my homeward journey—I came at once."

The missive brought a frown to my face. "Our hired men are busy, and Corporal Cotton will kindly take you this," it ran. "Father, who went east for a day or two, writes me to let you know immediately that Lane is coming over shortly to attach your horses and cattle."

I saw at once that if the money-lender seized our working beasts in the midst of the ploughing, when nobody had a team to spare, our prospects of a harvest would be ruined. I, however, reflected with grim satisfaction that the beasts were not mine, and that every man is entitled to protect the property entrusted to him. "Read that," I said, passing it to

Thorn. "You had better start after supper and let the South-side boys know. I'll warn the others, and it strikes me that Lane will have his work cut out to drive off a single head."

We had forgotten the bearer of the message, though once or twice I heard Sally's voice and Cotton's laugh; but on turning towards the house I saw he had backed his horse away from the corral and was somewhat dubiously regarding the fence. Sally leaned against it watching him with an assumption of ironical admiration.

"I'll see you keep your promise if I win," he said; and the girl laughed mockingly.

"If you don't I'll try not to cry over you," she retorted; and I guessed the madcap had made some wager with him that he could not leap the fence. Sally afterwards declared penitently that she never fancied he would attempt it; but I could see by the lad's face he meant to take the risk.

"Your horse is not fresh enough, and you'll certainly break your neck," I shouted.

Cotton glanced over his shoulder, then gathered up his bridle, while, as I ran towards him, Sally's heart must have failed her, for she called out: "Don't. I'll pay forfeit."

We were, however, both of us too late. The corporal had touched the beast with the spurs, and man and horse were flying towards the tall and well braced fence. I held my breath as I watched, for I had nailed the birch poles home securely, and had not much faith in the beast's leaping powers. It launched itself into the air, then there was a crash, and the top rail flew into splinters, while horse and rider parted company. The former, after rolling over, scrambled to its feet, but the uniformed figure smote the ground with a distressful thud and lay very still. Sally screamed, and must have climbed the fence, for when we had run round by the slip rails she was bending over the limp figure stretched upon the sod. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"He is dead, and I have killed him," she said.

I bent down with misgivings, for Cotton did not move, and there was something peculiar about his eyes. "Can you hear us? Are you badly hurt?" I asked.

"What's that?" he answered drowsily; and I gathered courage, remembering symptoms noticeable in similar cases; but Thorn had administered a dose of prohibited whisky before he became intelligible. Meantime, I was not wholly sorry for Sally, but seeing that she had been sufficiently punished, I said: "There are no bones broken, and his pulse is regaining strength."

Cotton's scattered senses were evidently returning, for he looked up, saying: "I'm only shaken, Miss Steel, and I won the bet. Don't be in a hurry, Ormesby, I hardly fancy I could get up just yet."

We waited several minutes, then, forcibly refusing Miss Steel's assistance, carried him into the house and laid him on a make-shift couch in our general room. His color was returning, but his face was awry with pain, and, so he expressed it, something had given way inside his back. It was a dismal termination to an inspiriting day, and the old depression returned with double force as I glanced at the untasted meal on the table, Lucille Haldane's note, and round the disordered room. Sally looked badly frightened, Steel was grim, and Cotton seemed to be suffering.

"It will pass presently, and you had better get your supper," he said. "I must try to eat a morsel, for I have a long way to ride to-night."

"You are not going to move off that couch until morning at least," I said; but the corporal answered: "I simply must. Is the horse all right?"

"Doesn't seem much the worse," said Steel; and Sally held a tea-cup to the corporal's lips, and afterwards coaxed him very prettily to eat a little. Seeing this, the rest of us attacked the cold supper, for we had duties that must be attended to. Returning to the house some little time later, I found Sally had disappeared and Cotton standing upright. He moved a few paces, and then halted, leaning heavily upon the table, while his face grew gray with pain.

"Lie down at once. You are not fit to move," I said.

"It means degradation and heavens know what besides unless I can reach the depot to-night," he said. "Mackay is away, and the other man's a cast-iron martinet, while I have just got my stripes and a hint of something better. You see we are not supposed to undertake private errands when under definite orders, and there are special reports and a receipt for the pay in my wallet."

He made another attempt to reach the door, then staggered, and grasping his arm I settled him with some difficulty once more on the couch. "You are right. There's nothing left but to face the inevitable," he said, trying to check a groan.

I forgot my own anxieties in my regret. "I am horribly sorry this should have happened," I said.

"You were far too generous; but can none of us take in the papers and get the money?"

Cotton tried to smile, though his fingers twitched. "Miss Haldane asked me; and it would be no use. They wouldn't give you the money, and if they did how would that get over the fact that I'm lying here helpless? Why couldn't it have happened on the return journey?"

"Did you tell Miss Haldane you were running a risk?" I asked.

"Would one naturally do so when she asked a favor?" he answered, with a trace of indignation.

It was of course absurd of Corporal Cotton, but I felt very sorry for him when he laid his head down with a groan, and subsequently surmised that Sally had overheard part, at least, of the conversation, for when the lad, who had perhaps not wholly recovered from the weakness of the shock, sank into sleep, she called me.

"It's all my fault, and I'll never forgive myself; but I never guessed he'd rush the fence," she said. "They couldn't put him in prison?"

"They might turn him out of the service, which, in his eyes, would be worse," I answered drily. "It should be a lesson to you, Sally. You can't help being pretty, but that is no reason why you should so often lead some unfortunate man into difficulties."

Sally's penitent expression vanished, and there was a flash in her eyes. "You are so foolish, all of you, and I guess you needn't look wise, Harry Ormesby. He is perhaps a little worse than the rest—and that's why one likes him. When he wakes up you and Charlie have just got to take those tight things off him and put him in your berth. If anybody wants him the next day or two they'll have to tackle me."

We did so presently, and, after seeing that our patient was comfortable, Sally returned, wearing his uniform tunic. "How does this fit me?" she asked.

Steel looked angry, and I grew thoughtful. Nobody who knew her was, as a rule, astonished at Sally's actions, but she asked the question soberly, with no trace of mischief.

"Do you wish me to say that you would look well in anything?" I asked.

"I don't. You can tell lies enough when you trade horses," she answered tartly. "It's a plain question —how does this thing fit me?"

"Tolerably well," and I surveyed her critically. "It is a trifle large, but if you don't draw it in too much at the waist it wouldn't fit you badly. Are you going to turn police trooper, Sally?"

Miss Steel was not generally bashful, but she looked a trifle confused as she answered: "Don't ask any more fool questions."

I went out soon afterwards to overhaul a plough under a shed, and had spent considerable time over it, when Steel approached with a lantern. "Have you seen anything of Sally?" he asked.

"No," I answered carelessly. "What mischief has she been contriving now?"

"That's just what I'm anxious to know; that, and where the corporal's horse is," he said. "They're both of them missing, and Cotton's fast asleep. I"—and Steel used a few illegal expletives before he continued—"I can't find his uniform either."

"It must be somewhere. You can't have looked properly," I said; and Steel restrained himself with an effort.

"You can try yourself, and I'd give a hundred dollars, if I had them, to see you find it," he said.

I hurriedly left the plough, but though we hunted everywhere could discover no trace of the missing uniform. "I never expected we would," said the harassed brother with a groan of dismay. "She's—well, the Lord only knows what Sally would do if she took the notion, and there's no shirking the trouble. I've got to find out if she has the whole blame outfit on."

"I'll leave you to settle that point," I said; and hearing the locked door of Sally's portion of the house wrenched open and garments being hurled about, surmised Steel was prosecuting his inquiries. He flung the split door to with a crash when he came out, leaving, as I saw by a brief glimpse, ruin behind him, and grew very red in face as he looked at me.

"It will be a mighty relief when she marries somebody," he said gloomily. "The only comfort is that you're a sensible man, and one could trust you, Ormesby. You will never breathe a word of this. There's no use trying to catch her, for she can get as much out of a beast as any man."

I pledged myself willingly, smothering a wild desire to laugh; and, as it happened, it was I who met the truant riding home very wearily two days later. Her mount was a chestnut, while Cotton's horse was gray, and there was a bundle strapped before her. Still, except for a spattering of mire, she was dressed in a manner befitting a damsel, and actually blushed crimson when I accosted her.

"Where have you been, Sally, and where did you get the horse?"

"In to the railroad; and I borrowed him from Carsley's wife. They'll send the corporal's over," she said. "I'm very tired, Harry Ormesby. Won't you get me supper instead of worrying me?"

Silence seemed best, and I could not resist the appeal, and so hurried back to set about the supper; while what passed between brother and sister I do not know, though when they came in together Sally appeared triumphant and Steel in a very bad humor.

"I'm going to see whether you have let the patient starve. You'll come along with me," she said, when she came out of her own quarters with no trace of the journey about her. We entered the lean-to shed, which Steel and I occupied together, and found Cotton better in health, though as depressed as he had been all day. Sally held out a bag and a handful of documents towards him.

"There are your papers and money. Now all you have to do is to get well again," she said demurely.

There was no mistaking the relief in the corporal's face, and he positively clutched at the articles she handed him. "You don't know what this has saved me from. But however did you get them?" he said.

A flush of tell-tale color crept into Sally's cheeks, and I noticed that her voice was not quite steady as she answered him. "You must solemnly promise never to ask that again or tell folks you were not at the depot yourself. Nobody will ask you, we fixed it up so well. Now promise, before I take them back again."

The lad did so, and Sally glanced at me. "If Harry Ormesby ever tells you I'll poison him."

I do not think Corporal Cotton ever discovered Sally's part, or who personated him, though he apparently suspected both myself and Steel; but when we went out together I turned to the girl: "Just one question, and then we'll forget it. How did you manage at the depot, Sally?"

Miss Steel avoided my glance, but she laughed. "It was very dark, there was only a half-trimmed lamp, and the agent was most asleep. It's pretty easy, any way, to fool a man," she said.

XVI.

THE DEFENCE OF CRANE VALLEY.

It was two days before Cotton could be sent to the police outpost in a wagon, but, so far as we could gather, the officer temporarily in charge took it for granted he had been injured on his homeward ride round by the Indian reserve which would have led him through Crane Valley. Some time, however, passed before he was fit for the saddle. Meanwhile Steel and I discussed Lane's latest move, and the best means of counteracting it.

"If one knew just what he wanted it would give us a better show, but we don't, and Lane don't tell anybody," my comrade observed gloomily.

"It's tolerably clear that he wants Crane Valley," said I. And Steel proceeded: "Then why don't he sail in and take all he's entitled to?"

"A part would not satisfy him when he wants it all," I said. "If he seizes the working beasts and breeding stock now we shall be left helpless for the season. He will also just take enough to cripple me, and leave me still in debt, while it would be useless to try to raise money to pay him off until the question of the railroad is settled."

"Will it ever be built?" asked Steel.

"It must be, some day; but whether that will be before we are ruined or buried Heaven only knows," I said. "Haldane seems to think the time will not be long, and judging by his tactics Lane agrees with him. Still, the newspapers take an opposite view."

"If it isn't"—and Steel frowned at the harness he was mending—"what will we poor fools do?"

"Stand Lane off as long as possible, and then strike for the mines in British Columbia. That, however, concerns the future, and we have first to decide what we will do if Lane arrives to-morrow."

Steel's face grew somber, but he waited until I added: "Then, because they're not my beasts as yet, if he can take them by main force—and I almost hope he'll try—he is welcome to do so."

"Now you're talking," and Steel smote a dilapidated saddle until the dust leapt forth from it. "The law on debt liens is mighty mixed, but I figure that the man who can keep hold has the best of it. Jacques, Gordon, and the rest will stand by us solid, and I'd work two years for nothing to get a fair chance at Lane."

We had both of us determined upon resistance already in our own minds, but it struck me that ours was a very forlorn hope, and the odds heavily against two plain farmers equally devoid of legal knowledge and capital who had pitted themselves against a clever unscrupulous man with the command of apparently unlimited money.

Lane did not come next day, nor the following one. Indeed, a number passed without bringing any word of him, and because idleness meant disaster we perforce relaxed our vigilance and resumed our ploughing. I had just yoked a pair of oxen to a double plough, one morning, when Boone's wagon came lurching up as fast as two whitened horses could haul it across the prairie.

"Lane came in with a hard-looking band of rascals by the Pacific mail last night," he said. "They had got whisky somewhere, and smashed the hotel windows because Imrie wouldn't get them supper in the middle of the night. He would start as soon as they were partly sober. Are you prepared to protect your property, Ormesby?"

"I am ready to protect other people's, which will suit me a good deal better in this instance," I said, with a certain satisfaction that the time for open resistance had come at last, though Lane had cunningly chosen a season when every man's presence was necessary at his own homestead.

"Don't count too much on that," said Boone. "If you have no documentary evidence, even the actual owners might have difficulty in substantiating your claim. Now you see why I demanded a written agreement. It strikes me that in this case possession is everything."

"If I can keep whole in body until sundown possession will remain with us," I said. "But there is no time to spare for talking. It will take hours to bring my neighbors up."

"Of course you arranged with Haldane to send you assistance?" said Boone; and hurled out an expletive when I answered stolidly: "That is just what I did not do. I do not even know if he is at home. It is not necessary to drag all one's friends into a private quarrel."

"Goodness knows why you are so unwarrantably proud of yourself, and it is not worth while wasting time over that question now," said Boone. "Roll up your thick-headed stockmen. I'm going on to Bonaventure for the one man whose presence would be worth a hundred of them."

He lashed his horses as he spoke, and I roused myself to action, while long before his wagon dipped over the rim of the prairie Thorn had set out at a gallop to bring our neighbors in. A neighbor may dwell from one to ten leagues away in that country. This left only Steel and I to hold Crane Valley with the exception of Sally. The girl absolutely refused to leave us, and it may not have been by accident that several heavy-headed brushes lay handy beside the stove. The stock were driven off as far as we dare follow them across the prairie, and we hoped would remain unseen in a hollow; the working horses made fast in the stable, and when a few head of pedigree cattle had been secured in the corral we could only sit down and wait the siege.

I spent several hours perched most uncomfortably with a pair of glasses on the roof; but though the day was clear nothing appeared above the rim of the prairie. It spread all round the horizon in low rolling rises, empty and desolate. My eyes grew dazzled, the continued use of the glasses produced a distressful headache; but still nothing moved on either rise or level, and it was a relief when at last Sally hailed me: "Come down and get your dinner; scenery won't feed anybody."

I had forgotten there was such a thing as food, and my throat and lips were dry; but on descending was surprised to find myself capable of making an excellent meal.

"You'll feel considerably better after that," said Sally, who watched our efforts with much approval.

"I guess you have forgotten you had no breakfast, either of you."

"That's so," assented her brother. "It's the first time I ever forgot it in my life. Say, what are you going to do with that big hasp-bar, Sally?"

Miss Steel's movements were perhaps a little nervous, but she was evidently not troubled by timidity. "I figured if anybody wanted to come poking in here it might keep them out—if it was nicely warmed," she said.

"You must do nothing rash; and keep out of harm's way, Sally," I said sternly. "They would be justified in seizing my household property."

"There's mighty little of it." And Miss Steel glanced round the room with contempt. "Do you figure Lane would come out hundreds of miles for your old crockery? Anything that's pretty round this place is mine, and I'm anxious to see the man who's going to take it from me."

I looked at the excited girl and then at her brother, who shook his head in signal that further remonstrance would be useless. My ideas respecting women had changed of late, and I somewhat resented the fact that they would not be content to sit still and be worshipped, but must insist on playing an active, and often a leading, part in all that happened.

"When Sally has made her mind up there's no use for anybody talking, and I should be sorry for that man," said Steel.

I had hardly mounted to the roof again than a line of diminutive objects straggled up above the horizon, and I called down: "They're coming!"

"Which way?" was the eager question; and Steel stamped when I answered moodily: "From the south."

"Lane's outfit. Can't you see the others?" he shouted.

I swept the glasses round the circumference of the prairie, and my voice was thick with disappointment as I answered: "No."

"Then you and I will have all we can do; and I wish to the Lord Sally was anywhere else," said Steel.

The diminutive figures rapidly resolved themselves into mounted men, with a wagon behind them, but still all the rest of the prairie was empty, and each time Steel asked the question: "Can't you see them yet?" I grew more doggedly savage as I answered: "No."

At last, when the money-lender's party were close at hand, I called out that two horsemen were just visible in the north. "That's Gordon; Jacques and the rest can't be here for a long while. It's time to come down," said Steel.

I came down, guessing that Lane, being on a lower level, could not see our allies, and waited with Steel, apparently unarmed, though we had weapons handy, in the space between house and stable. Sally had disappeared inside the dwelling, and I trusted would remain there. Presently, amid a rattle of gear and a confused trampling, a band of men rode up to the homestead and ranged themselves in rude order on either side of a wagon, some of them yelling in imitation of the Republican cowboy as they wheeled. They were unkempt, dirty, and dissolute in appearance, and I was not altogether surprised to see that most of them were English or Americans. One finds very little errant rascality on the Canadian prairie, perhaps because our dollars are very hardly earned, and there are few people worth exploiting there; but odd specimens exported from the great Republic and Old Country by disgusted friends gravitate towards the smaller Western cities when they find life in the waste too hard, and Lane had evidently collected some of the worst of them. He sat smoking in the wagon, and actually smiled at me.

"Kind of surprise party, isn't it, Ormesby?" he said. "I've come round to collect whatever I can in accordance with the notice served upon you. Here's a wallet full of papers, and this gentleman represents legal authority. He had a partner, but we lost him. Now, I've no personal feeling against you, and won't give you any trouble if it can be avoided."

Strange to say, I believed he spoke no more than the truth, and regarded us dispassionately as merely a source from which a little profit might be wrung. Neither Steel nor I, however, could look at the matter with equal calmness. We were standing for our rights, and ready to strike for shelter and daily bread, while the memory of former wrongs and a fierce revolt against the rich man's oppression fired our blood. Nevertheless, I remembered that it was necessary to gain time, and answered as coolly as I could:

"In the first place the stock and horses belong to my neighbors, and in the second you will be overstepping limits if you violently break into any portion of my homestead. Neither does the law allow any private individual to gather a band of ruffians and forcibly seize his debtor's property."

Lane probed his cigar with slow deliberateness. "You are growing quite smart, Ormesby; but isn't it a pity you didn't display your acumen earlier? I don't know that a stable can be considered a dwelling under the homestead regulations, and there's nothing to prevent any man hiring assistance to drive home sequestrated cattle. It is this gentleman's business to seize them, not mine. Neither is it clear how far a proved argument to feed another person's stock frees them of a lien for debt. Have you got any in writing?"

It was evident that in homely parlance my adversary held the best end of the stick. The administration of justice is necessarily somewhat rough-and-ready in the West, and I saw that the representative of legal authority was at least two-thirds drunk. I had also little doubt that Lane's mercenaries would act independently of him; while if they exceeded legal limits there would be only our testimony to prove it against a dozen witnesses. Possession was evidently everything.

Lane had possibly guessed my thoughts, for he said: "Don't be mad enough to start a circus, Ormesby. We have come a long way for the beasts, and mean to get them. Can't you see that we could beat you if it came to testimony? And I don't mind admitting that these rascals are not particular."

His tranquility enraged me; but I managed to answer him: "If you drive a hoof off you will have to defend your action against richer men than me."

"Well, I'll take my chances. It would cost them piles of dollars, and they would gain nothing then," he said. "Say, officer, hadn't you better begin?"

"Gotsh any papersh to prove objection?" demanded that individual, turning to me. And I took no pains to hide my disgust as I answered: "If I had I would not trouble to show them to you."

Steel, however, broke in: "We have. I'll show you a receipt for so many beasts to be fattened for Roland Adams."

"Whersh you keep them?" demanded the other.

"Where you won't find them; way back on the prairie," Steel answered triumphantly.

It was a blunder, for the other, who had a little shrewdness left, straightened himself. "Then all the beastsh heah belong to someone elsh," he said, with a tipsy leer, and waved his hand to the rest. "No papersh worth a shent. Whasher foolin' for? We'll just walk into the stable."

Several men sprang from their saddles; but Steel reached the door before them, and stood with his back against it, swinging a great birch staff. "Nobody comes in here," he said.

I was at his side next moment with a keen hay-fork, and the men halted in a semi-circle at the sight of our grim faces. "These points will reach anybody within six feet," I said.

"Better quit fooling while your hide's whole. There's most a dozen of us," said one, while another criticised my personal appearance in uncomplimentary terms. One or two in the background advised their comrades as to how we might best be maimed, but stood fast themselves, for Steel was big and brawny, and looked coolly murderous as he balanced the heavy staff; while whoever looked at me did so over the twin points of steel. The interlude lasted at least a minute, and I listened with strained attention for the thud of hoofs. Gordon could not be far off, but remained invisible behind a low rise even if the buildings had not obscured our view. Then a newcomer shoved his way through the rest, and I saw that he was the genuine article as he stood before me in Montana cattle rider's dress.

"It's a mighty poor show you're making, boys," he said contemptuously. "Stand out of my way. You can pick up the pieces when I've done with them."

He danced up and down a few paces and yelled, either to bewilder or impress us, and I was conscious of a grim amusement, while Steel watched him narrowly. Then, for the man had spirit enough, he leaped at the latter like a panther with something that twinkled in his hand. He was, however, a second too late, for the birch staff met him in the centre of his face; and, falling like a log, he lay where he fell. Steel deliberately snapped the knife beneath his heel, and Lane shouted something as my comrade said: "The next man I down at that trick will get his skull smashed in."

There was a wrathful cry from the others which convinced me that if we took our eyes off them for an instant the rush would come; but they hesitated, and Steel, standing poised with one foot forward and baleful eyes, made the staff whistle round his head. "You're a mighty long time beginning. Who's next? or may be you only brought one man along?" he said.

"Where's that blame officer? I guess this is his job," said one; but the worthy mentioned drew further back from the edge of the group.

"Deputsh you my authority. Thish not a house. Only beastsh live in stables," he explained.

"Better get it over. Sail in," said one of the biggest, and there was a shout of "Look out!" from Steel.

Four or five men made a rush upon us, and not wishing to inflict lethal injuries unless my life was threatened, I had barely time to reverse the fork before they were within striking distance. Another reeled backwards headlong beneath the staff, and knowing that a thrust is more effective and harder to evade than a blow, I used the long-hafted fork, blunt end foremost, as a pike with considerable success. The struggle continued for perhaps a minute, and was sharp while it lasted. Several times a panting man got within my guard, and Steel brought him down; but I was struck heavily, and had only a blurred vision of waving arms, scowling faces, and the whirling staff, while the air seemed filled with discordant shouts of encouragement from those outside. Either by sheer force of desperation, or the power of better weapons, we wore them out, and the group broke up. One or two limped badly as they straggled back, some swore, and there was blood on the faces and garments of the rest.

"One fellow got me badly on the chest," said Steel, who breathed heavily, and I was conscious of several painful spots; while when I had recovered breath I saw that Lane had drawn his wagon back some distance, and was apparently upbraiding his bodyguard in no measured terms.

"Jump clear!" cried Steel presently, and I sprang aside a moment too late, for an exultant shout went up when a heavy billet struck me on the head. I felt the blood trickle warm and sticky into one eye, and fell against the door feeling faint and sick, then stiffened myself again, with the fork held points foremost this time. Lane, it seemed, had lost control of his followers, and would doubtless rely upon hard swearing to protect himself from unfortunate consequences, for I now suspected there would be bloodshed unless help arrived very shortly.

"They're going for the house, and Sally's inside there," cried Steel; and for the first time I remembered that the dwelling was unprotected, and feared that the girl had not slipped away as she might have done by a rear window.

One of Lane's men reached the threshold before us, and three or four others followed hard upon his heels. The door was also wide open, and I sincerely trusted that Sally had made her escape. She had not, however, done so, for the head of a long brush swung out, and the first ruffian who rushed at the entrance staggered backwards against the comrade behind him. Steel flung him headlong next moment; the rest yielded passage before the tines of the fork, and we sprang into the house while our enemy's reinforcements came up at a run. So far we had succeeded better than might have been expected, but our adversaries were growing furious, and the defence of our property no longer appeared the main question. The girl had dropped the brush and grasped a red-ended iron bar.

"Give it me, and reach down that rifle, Sally," I gasped, and while Steel dragged up furniture for a barricade, the rest, not knowing its magazine was empty, recoiled before the Winchester muzzle.

"I'll be through in another minute. Keep them out," he said.

A brief respite followed, for the iron was glowing still, and our enemies' supply of missiles evidently exhausted; but as we waited, wondering what would happen next, I heard a beat of hoofs, and Sally cried out triumphantly as three well-mounted men swept up at a gallop.

"Ride over them!" shouted somebody. Warning cries went up, there was a scattering of Lane's ruffians, and the leading horseman pulled up his beast just outside the door. He was dripping with perspiration, bespattered all over, and his horse was white with lather.

"Couldn't get through earlier. Jacque's boys are away, but we sent a man to look for them, and he'll bring them along," he said.

We were very glad to see Rancher Gordon and his sturdy followers, though it was bad news he brought. Further reinforcements could hardly arrive in time to be of service, and where we had expected more than a dozen we must be content with three. Meantime, Lane's men had mounted and were trotting off across the prairie.

"They have probably gone in search of the loose stock. Come in. We have got to talk our next step over," I said.

The newcomers did so, and we were all of us glad of a breathing space. My head was somewhat badly cut, several purple bruises adorned my comrade's countenance, and the rest had ridden a long way in furious haste. At first the conference was conducted in half-breathless gasps, then the voices deepened into a sonorous ring, and I can recall the intent bronzed faces turned towards me, the thoughtful pauses when each speaker had aired his views, and how the slanting sunlight beat into the partly shadowed room. Last of all Rancher Gordon spoke. "We are waiting to hear your notions, Ormesby."

"The stable and corral must be held at any cost," I said, smearing my hands as I tried to clear my eye, while red drops splashed from them on to the table. "While that ought to be possible, we are hardly strong enough to force a fight in the open unless it is necessary. Lane's rascals may not find the stock, and may only be trying to draw us off, so my decision is to remain here. If they are successful we can see them from the roof, and must run the risk of taking their plunder from them. Should we fail we could follow them when our friends turn up."

"That's about my notion. We'll see you through with it," said Gordon quietly.

We had waited a considerable time before Steel hailed us from the roof that he could see our enemies riding south behind a bunch of cattle, and we mounted forthwith. There were now three rifles among us, but we had agreed these were not to be used unless somebody fired upon us. Riders and cattle dipped into a hollow, and we had covered several miles before we sighted them again. Lane and the representative of authority no longer accompanied them. The whole body wheeled round and halted when we came up. There was sweet grass in the hollow, so the cattle halted too, and for a space we sat silent, looking at each other. I dare not risk a blunder in face of such odds, though determined to make an effort to recover the stock.

"You make us tired," said the American, whose face was partly covered by a dirty rag. "Clear to perdition, before we make you."

He waved his arm round the horizon, as though to indicate where the place in question lay, and I edged my horse a little nearer him. He was the leading spirit, and it seemed possible that we might perhaps disperse the rest if I could dismount him. The man had evidently recovered from Steel's blow.

"We are not going away without the cattle, and you can see there are more of us now, while two proved too many for you before," I said, still decreasing the distance between us; but my adversary perhaps divined my intention, for a short barrel glinted in it when he raised his hand.

"It's going to be different this time. Keep back while you're safe," he said.

There was apparently no help for it, and I was not quite certain he would shoot, so balancing the long fork, lance fashion, I tightened my grip on the bridle, when Gordon drove his horse against me and gripped it violently. "Hold on. The boys are coming!" he said.

Friends and foes alike had been too intent to notice anything beyond each other during the past few minutes; but now a drumming of hoofs rose up from behind the rise which shut in the hollow. Then a drawn-out line of mounted men came flying down the slope, and Steel flung his hat up with a triumphant yell. "It's the Bonaventure boys," he said. "There's Adams and Miss Haldane leading them."

The American looked in my direction, and raised his hand in ironical salute. "I'm sorry to miss a clinch with you. It would have been a good one, but

I can't stay," he said. "Get on, you skulking coyotes. Unless you're smart in lighting out those cow drivers won't leave much of you."

His subordinates took the hint, and bolted down the hollow as hard as they could ride, while I drew a deep breath and turned towards the rescue party.

XVII.

THE RAISING OF THE SIEGE.

THEY were splendid horsemen who rode to our assistance, and their beasts as fine; but a slight figure led them a clear length ahead. In another minute Gordon's men copied their leader, who trotted forward with his broad hat at his knee, and I rode bareheaded with—though I had forgotten this—an ensanguined face, to greet the mistress of Bonaventure. She was glowing with excitement, and I had never seen anything to equal the fine damask in her cheeks. She started at the sight of me, and then impulsively held out a well-gloved hand.

"I hope you are not badly hurt?" she said.

"Only cut a little," I answered, gripping the little hand fervently. "You have done a great deal for us and no doubt prevented serious bloodshed. It was wonderfully——"

"Don't. It was not in any way wonderful. My father was absent when Mr. Boone brought me the news, and, as you know, I am responsible for the prosperity of Bonaventure in his absence. Our cattle were in jeopardy."

She ceased abruptly, and grew pale, while I felt horribly ashamed when I saw the cause of it. My hands had been reddened from clearing my eyes, and glove and wrist were foul with crimson stains.

Courageous as she was, the girl had sickened at the sight of them.

"I can't excuse myself. You must try to forgive me," I said. "Please don't look at it."

Lucille Haldane promptly recovered from the shock of repulsion. "How could you help it—and you were hurt protecting our cattle. I can see the brand on some," she said. "It was very foolish of me to show such weakness."

"You must come back to the house with me at once and rest," I said. "I'm indebted to you, boys, but the best way you could help me would be to drive those cattle into the corral. Then, for you are probably tired and hungry, come up and see what Sally Steel can find for you."

The newcomers hesitated, and inquired whether they might not pursue and chastise our adversaries instead, but Lucille Haldane rebuked them. "You will do just what Rancher Ormesby tells you," she said; and, turning towards me, added: "I am ready to go with you."

Lucille was still a trifle pale, and wondering, because I could not see myself, that one with so much spirit should be affected by so small a thing, I presently dismounted and led her horse by the bridle. I had torn off the offending glove, and when we halted by the corral would have removed the stains from the wrist with a handkerchief.

"No," said Lucille, snatching her hand away just too late, with a gesture of dismay, "do not touch it with that, please."

Then I remembered that the handkerchief had last been used to rub out the fouled breach of a gun. The girl looked at the blur of red and black which resulted from my efforts, and frowned, then broke out into a rippling laugh. "Beatrice said your ways were refreshingly primitive, and I think she was right," she said.

The laugh put heart into me, but I still held the bridle with an ensanguined hand close beside the little smeared one; and so, followed by as fine an escort as a princess could desire, we came to my door side by side.

I had, however, misgivings when I helped Lucille Haldane from the saddle concerning the reception Steel's sister might accord her. Sally's loyalty to her friends was worthy of her name; but she was stanchly democratic, more than a little jealous, and not addicted to concealing her prejudices. The fears were groundless. Sally was waiting in the doorway she had defended, and while I hoped for the best the two stood a moment face to face. They were both worth inspection, though the contrast between them was marked, for Haldane's daughter was slight and slender, with grace and refinement stamped equally upon every line of her delicately chiselled face and curve of dainty figure down to the little feet beneath the riding skirt. Sally was round and ruddy of countenance, stalwart in frame, with the carriage of an Amazon, and, I think, could have crushed Lucille with a grip of her arms; but both had an ample portion of the spirit of their race.

Then Steel's sister, stepping forward, took both the girl's hands within her own, stooped a little, and kissed her on either cheek, after which she drew her into the house, leaving her brother and myself equally astonished. He looked at me whimsically, and though I tried I could not frown.

"That's about the last thing I expected. How does it strike you?" he said. "Afraid of committing yourself? Well, I don't mind allowing I expected most anything else. All women are curious, but there's no understanding Sally."

We were not left long to wonder, for Miss Steel reappeared in the doorway.

"You two still standing there as if there was nothing to do. Get a big fire on in the outside stove and kill off about half the chickens. You're not to come in, Harry Ormesby, until I've fixed you so you're fit to be seen."

I feared that Lucille heard her, and wondered what she thought. Our mode of life was widely different from that at Bonaventure, and what would have been possible in my case had I not fallen into the hands of Lane. We slew the chickens with the assistance of the newcomers, and sat down on the grass to pluck them, a fowl for every guest, although I was slightly uncertain whether that would be sufficient. There is a similarity between the very old and the very new, and ancient poets perhaps best portray the primitive, sometimes heroic, life of effort the modern stockrider and ploughman lead upon the prairie.

"Why did you bring Miss Haldane, Boone? You should have known better than allow her to run the slightest risk," I asked, on opportunity; and the photographer smiled enigmatically.

"Miss Haldane did not ask my permission, and I am doubtful if anybody could have prevented her. She said she was mistress of Bonaventure, and the way the men stirred when she told them was proof enough that one could believe her."

Presently Sally came out with a roll of stickingplaster, and, while every bachelor present offered assistance and advice, proceeded to fix me, as she expressed it. Then, amid a burst of laughter, she stood back a little to survey her work with pride.

"I guess you can come in. You look too nice for anything. Gordon and Adams, you'll walk in, too. The rest will find all they want in the cook shed, and it will be your own fault if you don't help yourselves."

I was a little astonished when, with a cloth bound round my head, I entered the house, for Miss Steel was in some respects a genius. There was no trace of disorder. Sally was immaculately neat, Lucille Haldane might never have passed the door of Bonaventure, and the two had apparently become good friends, while a table had been set out with Sally's pretty crockery, and, as I noticed, an absolutely spotless cloth, which was something of a rarity. I was also glad of the presence of Boone, for Gordon was a big, gaunt, silent man, and the events of the day had driven any conversational gifts we possessed out of both myself and Steel. When it pleased him, Adams, by which name alone he was known to the rest, could entertain anybody, and that, too, in their own particular idiom. There was no trace of the pedler about him now, and his English was the best spoken in the Old Country. I noticed Lucille Haldane looked hard at him when she took her place at the table.

"It is curious, but I have been haunted by a feeling that we have met before to-day," she said. "If I am mistaken, it must have been somebody who strongly resembles you."

For just a moment Boone looked uneasy, but he answered with a smile: "I don't monopolize all the good looks upon the prairie."

The girl flashed a swift sidelong glance at me, and I feared my countenance was too wooden to be natural. "I am sure of the resemblance now, though there is a change. It was one evening at Bonaventure, was it not?" she said. "Have you forgotten me?"

"That would be impossible," and Boone bent his head a little as he made the best of it. "I see that, if necessary, I could rely upon Miss Haldane's kindness a second time."

Lucille looked thoughtful, Sally inquisitive, and I feared the latter might complicate circumstances by attempting to probe the mystery. Neither Gordon nor Steel noticed anything, but Boone was a judge of character and Lucille keen of wit. He asked nothing further, but I saw a question in his eyes.

"I think you could do so," she said. "You seem to have trusty friends, Rancher Ormesby; though that is not surprising upon the prairie."

The words were simply spoken, and wholly unstudied; but Lucille Haldane had a very graceful way, and there was that in her eyes which brought a sparkle into those of Sally, and I saw had made the silent Gordon her slave. Her gift of fascination was part of her birthright, and she used it naturally without taint of artifice.

"Could anybody doubt it after to-day?" I said.

Then Boone smiled drily. "I suppose it devolves upon me to acknowledge the compliment, and am afraid that some of them are better than he deserves," he said. "At least, I am willing to testify that Rancher Ormesby does not importune them, for I never met any man slower to accept either good advice or well-meant assistance. Have you not found it so, Miss Steel?"

"All you men are foolish, and most of you slow," Sally answered archly. "I had to convince one with a big hard brush to-day."

This commenced the relation of reminiscences, mostly humorous, of the affray, for we could afford to laugh, and all joined in the burst of merriment which rose from outside when several horsemen came up at a gallop out of the prairie. A stockrider of Caledonian extraction had borrowed my banjo to amuse his comrades, and they appreciated his irony when he played the new arrivals in to the tune of "The Campbells Are Coming."

Then he took off his hat to the uniformed figure which led the advance. "Ye're surely lang in comin', Sergeant, dear," he said.

There was another roar of laughter, and I heard Mackay's voice. "It was no' my fault, and ye should ken what kind of horses ye sell the Government; but now I'm here I'm tempted to arrest the whole of ye for unlawful rioting!"

He halted in the doorway with displeasure in his face, and, disregarding my invitation, waited until Miss Haldane bade him be seated, while before commencing an attack upon a fowl, he said drily: "Maybe I had better begin my business first. It would be a poor return to eat your supper and then arrest ye, Ormesby."

"You had better make sure of the supper, and if you can take me out of the hands of my allies you are welcome to," I said.

Boone's lips twitched once or twice as though in enjoyment of a hidden joke as he discoursed with the sergeant upon the handling of mounted men and horses. He showed, I fancied, a curious knowledge of cavalry equipment and manœuvres, and Mackay was evidently struck with his opinions. I also saw Lucille Haldane smile when the sergeant said: "If ever ye pass my station come in and see me. It's a matter o' regret to me I had not already met ye."

"Thanks," said Boone, just moving his eyebrows as he looked across at me. "I narrowly missed spending some time in your company a little while ago."

"And now to business," said Mackay, with a last regretful glance at the skeletonized chicken. "From what I gather ye are all of ye implicated. I would like an account from Mr. Adams and Miss Haldane first."

"How did you come here instead of Gardiner; and how do you know there is anything for you to trouble about?" I asked, and the sergeant showed a trace of impatience.

"Gardiner goes back to-morrow. Ye are my own particular sheep, and it would take a new man ten years to learn the contrariness of ye. I heard some talk at the railroad and came on in a hurry. Do ye usually nail up your stable or cut your own head open, Rancher Ormesby?"

Each in turn furnished an account of the affray, I last of all; and Mackay expressed no opinion until Lucille Haldane asked him: "Was it not justifiable for me to take measures to protect my father's cattle?"

"Supposing the Bonaventure brand had not been on that draft and Lane's men retained possession, what would ye have done?" was the shrewd rejoinder; and Lucille smiled as she looked steadily at the speaker.

"I really think, sergeant, that I should have ridden over them."

Mackay seemed to struggle with some natural feeling; but the silent rancher smote the table. "By the Lord, you would, and I'd have given five hundred dollars to go through beside you!" he said.

"Ye are quite old enough to ken better," said Mackay sententiously; and the rancher squared his shoulders as he answered:

"I'm as good as any two of your troopers yet, and was never run into a cattle corral. When I'm old enough to be useless I'll join the police."

"What were ye meaning?" asked the sergeant.

Gordon laughed. "Just that for a tired man it's a nice soft berth. You take your money and as much care as you can that you never turn up until the trouble's over!"

Before Mackay could retort, Lucille, smiling upon them, raised her hand. "I think you should both know better, and I want you to tell me, sergeant, what will be the end of this. Surely nobody has any right to drive off cattle and horses which don't belong to him?"

Mackay looked somewhat troubled, and one could guess that while eager to please the fair questioner, he shrank with official caution from committing himself. "It's not my part to express an opinion on points that puzzle some lawyers," he said. "Still, I might tell ye that it will cost one man his position. Human nature's aye deceitful, Miss Haldane, and if Rancher Ormesby prosecuted them it would be just two or three men's word against a dozen. Forby, they might make out illegal resistance against him!"

"Sergeant," said Lucille Haldane, looking at him severely: "Dare you tell me that you would not take the word of three ranchers against the oath of a dozen such men as Lane?"

Mackay smiled upon her, though he answered drily: "They're both hard to manage, and ungrateful for their benefits; but maybe I would. Still, I am, ye see, neither judge nor jury. Would ye prefer a charge against them, Ormesby?"

I was willing enough to do so, but had already reflected. Every moment of my time was needed, the nearest seat of justice far away, and it would be only helping Lane if I wasted days attempting to substantiate a charge. I also surmised by his prompt disappearance when the fracas became serious that it would be very difficult to implicate my enemy, even if he did not turn the tables upon me. Boone, when I looked at him, made a just perceptible negative movement with his head.

"I must leave this affair to the discretion of the police," I said. "Several of Lane's friends have good cause to be sorry for themselves already, and it is hardly likely his action will be repeated."

Mackay said nothing further, and shortly afterwards Lucille said she must take her departure. Sally stood smiling in the doorway while the riders of Bonaventure did her homage, and those whose compliments did not please her suffered for their clumsiness. When I rode out with Lucille Haldane there was a lifting of wide hats, and the sergeant, sitting upright in his saddle, saluted her as we passed with several splendid horsemen riding on either hand.

I afterwards heard that Sally said to him mischievously: "I guess you men don't quite know everything. How long did it take you to break your troopers in? Yonder's a slip of a girl who knows nothing of discipline or drill, and there's not a man in all that outfit wouldn't ride right into the place where bad policemen go if she told him. As good as your troopers, aren't they? What are you thinking now?"

The sergeant followed her pointing hand, and, as it happened, Lucille and I were just passing beyond the rise riding close together side by side. Mackay looked steadily after us, and doubtless noticed that Lucille rode very well. "I would not blame them. I'm just thinking I'm sorry for Corporal Cotton," he said.

Sally looked away across the prairie, and turning saw a faint smile fade out of the sergeant's face. "What do you mean? Can't you ever talk straight like a sensible man?" she asked.

"The corporal's young, an' needs considerable convincing," was the dry answer.

When we dipped beyond the rise I turned to Lucille Haldane. "What did you think of Sally? She is a stanch ally, but not always effusive to strangers," I said.

I could not at the moment understand Lucille Haldane's expression. The question was very simple, but the girl showed a trace of confusion, and was apparently troubled as to how she should frame the answer. This did not, however, last long, and when she raised her eyes to mine there was in them the same look of confidence there had been when she said, "I believe in you." It was also very pleasant to see.

"I think a great deal of her, and must repeat what I said already. You have very loyal friends. Miss Steel told me at length how kind you had been to her and her brother, and I think they will fully repay you."

My wits must have been sharpened, for I understood, and blessed both Sally and the speaker. If Lucille Haldane, being slow to think evil, had faith in those she knew, it was possible she was glad of proof to justify the confidence, and Sally must have furnished it.

"They have done so already," I said.

There was always something very winning about my companion, but she had never appeared so desirable as she did just then. The day was drawing towards its close, and the light in the west called up the warm coloring wind and sun had brought into her face, and showed each grace of the slight figure silhouetted against it. The former was, perhaps, not striking at first sight, though, with its setting of ruddy gold and hazel eyes filled with swift changes, pretty enough; but its charm grew upon one, and I noticed that when she patted the horse's neck the dumb beast moved as though it loved her. There was nothing of the Amazon about its rider except her courage.

"I have heard a good deal about your enemy and yourself of late, but there are several points which puzzle me, and though I know you have his sympathies, father is not communicative," she said. "For instance, if you do not resent the allusion, he could with so little trouble have made a difference in the result of your sale."

"How could that be?" I asked, merely to see how far the speaker's interest in my affairs had carried her, and she answered: "Even if there had been nothing we needed at Bonaventure he could have made the others pay fair prices for all they bought. I cannot understand why he said it was better not to do so."

I also failed; but a light broke in upon me. "Did you suggest that he should?" I asked, and the girl answered with some reluctance: "Yes; was it not natural that I should?"

"No one who knew you could doubt it," I said; and Lucille Haldane presently dismissed me. I sat still and watched her and her escort diminish across the long levels, and then rode back slowly towards Crane Valley. Remembering Haldane's mention of a promise, the news that it was his younger daughter who sent him to my assistance brought at first a shock of disappointment. I had already convinced myself that Beatrice Haldane must remain very far beyond my reach, but the thought that she had remembered me and sent what help she could had been comforting, nevertheless. Now it seemed she had forgotten, and that consolation must be abandoned too. And yet the disappointment was not so crushing but that I could bear it with the rest. What might have been had passed beyond the limits of possibility, and there was nothing in the future to look forward to except a struggle against poverty and the wiles of my enemy.

Steel took my horse when I rode up to the house, and it was a coincidence that his first remark should be: "We beat him badly this time and he'll lie low a while. Then I guess you'll want both eyes open when he tries his luck again."

XVIII.

THE VIGIL-KEEPER.

It was a clear starlit night when I rode across a tract of the Assiniboian prairie, some two hundred miles east of Crane Valley. A half-moon hung in the cloudless ether, and the endless levels, lying very silent under its pale radiance, seemed to roll away into infinity. They had no boundary, for the blueness above them melted imperceptibly through neutral gradations into the earth below, which, gathering strength of tone, stretched back again to the centre of the lower circle a vast sweep of silvery gray.

There was absolute stillness, not even a grass-blade moved; but the air was filled with the presage of summer, and the softness of the carpet, which returned no sound beneath the horse's feet, had its significance. That sod had been bleached by wind-packed snow and bound into iron hardness by months of Arctic frost. Bird and beast had left it, and the waste had lain empty under the coldness of death; but life had once more conquered and the earth was green again. Even among the almost unlettered born upon it there are few men impervious to the influence of the prairie on such a night; and in days not long gone by the half-breed *voyageurs* told strange stories of visions seen upon it during the lonely journeys they made for the great fur-trading company. Its vastness and emptiness impresses the human atom who becomes conscious of an indefinite awe or uplifted by an exaltation which vanishes with the dawn, for there are times when, through the silence of measureless spaces, man's spirit rises into partial touch with the greater things unseen.

My errand was prosaic enough—merely to buy cattle for Haldane and others on a sliding-scale arrangement. I could see a possibility of some small financial benefit, and that being so had reluctantly left Crane Valley, where I was badly needed, because the need of dollars was even greater. Also, as time was precious, I had decided to travel all night instead of spending it as a guest of the last farmer I bargained with. I was at that time neither very imaginative nor over sentimental; but the spell of the prairie was stronger than my will, and, yielding to it, I rode dreamily, so it seemed, beyond the reach of petty troubles and the clamor of our sordid strife into a shadowy land of peace which, defying the centuries, had retained unchanged its solemn stillness from the beginning. The stars alone sufficed to call up the fancy, for there being neither visible heavens nor palpable atmosphere, only a blue transparency, the eye could follow the twinkling points of flame far backwards from one to another through the unknown spaces beyond our little globe. Nothing seemed impossible on such a night, and only the touch of the bridle and faint jingle of metal material.

It was in this mood that I became conscious of a shadow object near the foot of a rise. It did not seem a natural portion of the prairie, and when I had covered some distance resolved itself into a horse and a dismounted man. His broad hat hung low in his hand, his head was bent, and he stood so intent that I had almost ridden up to him before he turned and noticed me. Then, as I checked my horse, I saw that it was Boone.

"Whatever has brought you here?" I asked.

"That I cannot exactly tell you when we know so little of the influences about us on such a night as this. It is at least one stage of a pilgrimage I must make," he said.

Had this answer been given me in the sunlight I should have doubted the speaker's mental balance; but one sets up a new standard of sanity on the starlit prairie on a night of spring, and I only saw that the spell was also upon him. He held a great bunch of lilies (which do not grow on the bare Western levels) in one hand, and his face was changed. Even in Boone's reckless humor there had been a sardonic vein which sometimes added a sting to the jest, and I knew what the shadow was which accounted for his fits of silent grimness. Now he seemed strangely calm, but rather reverent than sad.

"I cannot understand you," I said.

"No?" he answered quietly. "How soon you have forgotten; but you helped me once. Come, and I will show you."

He tethered his horse to an iron peg, beckoned me to do the same, and then, moving forward until we stood upon the highest of the rise, pointed to something that rose darkly from the grass. Then I remembered, and swung my hat to my knee, as my eyes rested on a little wooden cross. Following the hand he stretched out I could read the rude letters cut upon it—"Helen Boone."

He stooped, and, I fancied with some surprise, lifted a glass vessel from beneath a handful of withered stalks. He shook them out gently, laid the fresh blossoms in their place, and a faint fragrance rose like incense through the coolness of the dew. Then he turned, and I followed him to where we had left the horses. "There are still kind souls upon this earth, and one of them placed that vessel under the last flowers I left. You have a partial answer to your question now."

I bent my head, and, seeing that he was not averse to speech, said quietly: "You come here sometimes? It is a long journey."

"Yes," was the answer; and Boone's voice vibrated. "She who sleeps there gave up a life of luxury for me; and is a three hundred mile journey much to make, or a summer night too long to watch beside her? I am drawn here, and there are times when one wonders if it is possible for us to rise into partial communion with those who have passed into the darkness before us."

"It is," I answered gravely, "all a mystery to me. Can you conceive such a possibility?"

"Not in any tangible shape to such as I, but this at least I know. In spite of the destruction of the mortal clay, when I can see my way no further, and lose courage in my task, fresh strength comes to me after a night spent here."

"Your task?" I said. "I guessed that there was a motive behind your wanderings."

"There is one," and Boone's voice rose to its natural level. "The wagon journeys suit it well. Had Lane ruined me alone I should have tried to pay my forfeit for inexperience and the risk I took gracefully; but when I saw the woman, who had lain down so much for me, fading day by day that he might add to his power of oppressing others the dollars which would have saved her life, the case was different. The last part he played in the pitiful drama was that of murderer, and the loss he inflicted upon me one that could never be forgiven."

"And you are waiting revenge?" I said.

"No"; and Boone looked back towards the crest of the rise. "At first I did so, but it is justice which prompts me now. I have a full share of human passions, and once I lay in wait for him with a rifle—my throat parched up and a fire of torment in my heart; but when he passed at midnight within ten paces I held my hand and let him go. Perhaps it was because I could not take the life of even that venomous creature in cold blood, and feared he would not face me. Perhaps another will was stronger than my own, for, with every purpose strained against what seemed weakness, it was borne in upon me that I could not force him to stand with a weapon, and that I dare not kill him grovelling. Then the power went out of me, and I let him go. Yet I have twice lain long hours in hot sand under a deadly rifle fire, Ormesby. There are many mysteries, and as yet it is very little that we know."

"But you are following him still, are you not?" I asked. And Boone continued: "As I said, it is for justice, and it was here I learned the difference. I would not take the reptile's life unless he met me armed in the daylight, which he would never do; but for the sake of others—you and the rest, whose toil and blood he fattens upon—I am waiting and working for the time when, without a crime, it may be possible to end his career of evil."

We were both silent for a few minutes, and I felt that Boone's task, self-imposed or otherwise, was a worthy one. Lane was a man without either anger or compassion—an incarnation of cunning and avarice more terrible to human welfare than any legendary monster of the olden time. It was no figure of speech to declare that he fattened upon poor men's blood and agony, and his overthrow could not be anything but a blessing. Still, it was in prosaic speech that, considering the practical aspect of the question, I said: "I wish you luck, but you will need a long patience, time, and money."

"I have them," was the answer. "The first was the hardest to acquire. Time—I could wait ages if I knew the end was certain; and, as to money, when it came too late to save her, someone died in the old country, and a portion of the property fell to me. Well, you can guess my purpose—using all means short of bloodshed and perjury to take him in his own net. She who sleeps there was pitiful and gentle, but she hated oppression and cruelty, and I feel that if she knows—and I think it is so—she would smile on me."

Boone's face was plain before me under the moon. It was quietly confident, calm, and yet stamped with a solemn purpose. He had, it seemed, mastered his passions, and would perhaps be the more dangerous because he followed tirelessly, with brain unclouded by hatred or impatience. I felt that there was much I should say in the shape of encouragement and sympathy, but the only words which rose to my lips were: "He has fiendish cunning."

"And I was once a careless fool!" said Boone. "Still, the most cunning forget, and blunder at times.

I, however, can never forget, and when he does, it will be ill for Lane. I have—I don't know why—spoken to you, Ormesby, as I have spoken to no man in the Dominion before, and I feel I need ask no promise of you. I am going east with the sunrise, but must spend the hours between alone."

I left him to keep his vigil with his dead, and camped in a hollow some distance away. That is to say, I tethered the horse, rolled a thick brown blanket round me, and used the saddle for a pillow. There was no hardship in this. The grasses, if a trifle damp, were soft and springy, the night still and warm; and many a better man has slept upon a worse bed in the Western Dominion. Slumber did not, however, come at first, and I lay watching the stars, neither asleep nor wholly awake, until they grew indistinct, and a woman's figure, impalpable as the moonlight, gathered shape upon a rise of the prairie.

It was borne in upon me that this was Helen Boone risen from her sleep; for she was ethereal, and her face with its passionless calmness not that of a mortal, while no shadow touched the grasses when she passed, and, fading, gave place or changed into one I knew. Haldane's eldest daughter looked down from the rise on me, but she, too, seemed of another world, wearing a cold serenity and a beauty that was not of this earth. She also changed with a marvelous swiftness before my bewildered vision, and it was now Lucille Haldane who moved across the prairie with soft words of pity on her lips and yet anger in her eyes. She, at least, appeared not transcendental, but a living, breathing creature of flesh and blood subject to human weaknesses, and I raised myself on one elbow to speak to her.

The prairie was empty. Nothing moved upon it; even the horse stood still, while, when I sank back again, moonlight and starlight went out together; and perhaps it was as well, for, sleeping or waking, a plain stock-raiser has no business with such fancies, and next morning I convinced myself that I had dreamed it all. I had doubtless done so, and the explanation was simple. The influence of the night, or the words of Boone, had galvanized into abnormal activity some tiny convolution of the brain; but, even that once granted, it formed the beginning of the question, not the end, and Boone had, it seemed, supplied the best solution when he said we know so little yet.

The sun was lifting above the prairie when I set out in search of Boone with my horse's bridle over my arm. I met him swinging across the springy sod in long elastic strides, but there was nothing about him which suggested one preyed upon by morbid fancies or the visionary. His eyes were a little heavy, but that was all, for with both of us the dreams of the night had melted before the rising sun. The air had been freshened by the dew, and the breeze, which dried the grasses, roused one to a sense of human necessities and the knowledge that there was a day's work to be done. I was also conscious of an unfanciful and very prosaic emptiness.

"I wonder where we could get anything to eat. I have a long ride before me," said Boone, when he greeted me.

"It can hardly be safe for you to be seen anywhere in this neighborhood," I said; and Boone smiled at me.

"I walked openly into the railroad depot and asked for a package yesterday. You forget that I partly changed my appearance, while, so far as memory serves, only two police troopers occasionally saw me. The others?—you should know your own kind better, Ormesby. Do you think any settler in this region would take money—and Lane offered a round sum—for betraying me?"

"No," I answered with a certain pride; "that is to say, not unless he was a nominee of the man you name."

No proof of this was needed, but one was supplied us. A man who presently strode out of a hollow stopped and stared at Boone. He was, to judge from his appearance, one of the stolid bushmen who come out West from the forests of Northern Ontario—tireless men with axe and plough, but with little knowledge of anything else.

"I'm kind of good at remembering faces, and I've seen you before," he said. "You are the man who used to own my place."

"How often have you seen me?" asked Boone.

"Once in clear daylight; twice back there at night," answered the stranger.

"Did you know that you could have earned a good many dollars by telling the police as much?" asked Boone; and the other regarded him with a frown.

"I'm a peaceable man when folks will let me; but I don't take that kind of talk from anybody."

"I was sure, or I wouldn't have asked you," said Boone. "They don't raise mean Canadians yonder in the country you came from among the rocks and trees. You're not over rich either, are you, to judge from my own experience, for I put more dollars into the land than I ever took out of it. However, that don't concern the main thing. Just now I'm a hungry man."

The big axeman's face relaxed, and he laughed the deep, almost silent, laugh which those like him learn in the shadow of the northern pines. There is as little mirth in it as there is in most of their hard lives, but one can generally trust them with soul and body. "Breakfast will be ready soon's I get home. You just come along," he said.

We followed him to the log-house which had risen beside Boone's dilapidated dwelling. A neatly-dressed, dark-haired woman was busy about the stove, and our host presented us very simply. "Here's the man who shot the money-lender, and a partner, Lou."

The woman, who laid down the pan she held, cast a quick glance of interest at my companion. "We have seen you, and wondered why you never looked in," she said.

"Did you twice do a great kindness for me?" asked Boone.

The woman's black eyes softened. "Sure, that was a little thing, and don't count for much. The posies were so pretty, and I figured they'd keep a little longer fresh," she said.

"It was one of the little things which count the most," said Boone.

Thereupon the woman's olive-tinted face flushed into warmer color, while her long-limbed spouse observed: "She's of the French habitant stock, and their ways of showing they haven't forgotten aren't the same as ours."

Breakfast was set before us, and I think Boone had made firm friends of our hosts before we finished the meal. He had abilities in this direction. They on their part were very simple folks, the man silent for the most part, rugged in face, and abrupt when he spoke, but shrewd in his own way it seemed withal, and probably as generous as he was hard at a bargain. His wife was of the more emotional Latin stock, quick in her movements, and one might surmise equally quick in sympathy.

"You are not the man who bought the place at the sale," said Boone, at length. "I can remember him tolerably well, and, if I couldn't, one would hardly figure you were likely to work under Lane."

"No!" and the farmer laughed his curious laugh again. "No. I shouldn't say. We never worked for any master since my grandfather got fired for wanting his own way by the Hudson's Bay, and I guess neither Lane nor the devil could handle the rest of us. He once came round to try."

"How?" I asked, and the gaunt farmer sighed a little as he filled his pipe. "This way. He was open to finance me to buy up a poor devil's place, and if I'd had a little less temper and a little more sense, I might have obliged him, and landed a good pile of dollars, too."

"He's just talking. Don't you believe him," broke in the woman, with an indignant glance at her spouse.

I fancied Boone saw the drift of this, which was more than I did, and the farmer nodded oracularly in his direction when I asked: "What did you do instead?"

"Just reached for a big ox-goad, and walked up to him like a blame millionaire or hot-headed fool. Them negotiations broke right off, and he lit out across the prairie talking 'bout assaults and violence at twenty mile an hour. Some other man will know better, and that's just how Lane will get badly left some day."

The woman laughed immoderately: "It was way better'n a circus," she said. "He didn't tell you he rammed the ox-goad into the skittish horse, and Lane he just hugged the beast."

The picture of the full-fleshed Lane, who made a very poor figure in the saddle at any time, careering panic-stricken across the prairie with his arms about the neck of a bolting horse appealed to me; but in regard to the possibility of the usurer's future discomfiture I was still in the dark, and asked for enlightenment.

"It's easy," said the farmer. "Lane he squeezes somebody until he can't hold on to his property, then he puts up the dollars and another man buys the place, dirt-cheap for him, in his own name. Suppose that man goes back on Lane? 'This place is my own,' says he. Well, he's recorded owner, isn't he? and I figure Lane wouldn't be mighty keen on dragging that kind of case into the courts."

"But he wouldn't put any man in unless he had him by the throat," said I; and the farmer grinned.

"Juss so! He'll choke some fellow with grit in him a bit too much some day, and when the wrong breed of scoundrel is jammed right up between the devil and the sea, it's quite likely he'll go for the devil before he starts swimming."

"I"—and Boone regarded the farmer fixedly—

"quite agree with you. Do you mind telling me what you gave for this place?"

Our host named the sum without hesitation, adding that he would be glad to show us over it; and Boone's face grew somber as he said: "It is more than twice what it was sold for when it was stolen from me."

We walked round the ploughed land, inspected the stock, stables, and barns, and when, after a cordial parting with our hosts, we rode away, Boone turned to me: "It was an ordeal and harrowing to see what might have been but for an insatiable man's cunning and my poverty. Another half-hour of the memories would have been too much for me. Well, we can let that pass. They were kind souls, and this last lesson may have been necessary. Strange, isn't it, that the simple are sometimes shrewder than the wise?"

"For instance?" I said; and Boone smiled significantly.

"Yonder very plain farmer has hit upon a weak spot in Lane's armor which the keenest brain upon this prairie—I don't mean my own, of course—has hitherto failed to see."

Soon afterwards we separated, each going his different way.

XIX.

THE WORK OF AN ENEMY.

WHATEVER action the police took concerning Lane's descent upon Crane Valley was not apparent, and Thorn may have been justified in deciding that they took none at all. However that may have been, Lane left us in peace for a while, and it was not by his own hands that the next bolt was launched against me. He preferred, as a rule, to strike through another person's agency, and usually contrived it so that when trouble resulted the agent bore the brunt of it.

I was tramping behind the seeder one fine morning, alternately watching the somewhat unruly team and the trickle of golden grain into the good black loam, when two horsemen appeared upon the prairie. They headed for the homestead, and living in a state of expectancy, as we then did, I shared the misgivings of Thorn. "They're coming our way in a hurry, sure; and the sight of anyone whose business I don't know worries me just now," he said.

"If it's bad news we'll learn it soon enough," I said. "Go on to the end of the harrowing. That we'll have a frost-nipped harvest if we're not through with the sowing shortly is the one thing certain."

The two horsemen drew nearer, and it appeared that both wore uniform, while I caught the glint of carbines. This in itself was significant, and I wondered whether Mackay had discovered the identity of Boone. Shortly I recognized the Sergeant and Cotton, who a little later drew bridle beside the seeder. Mackay's face was expressionless, but Cotton looked distinctly unhappy, and once more I felt sorry for Boone.

"I have a word for ye. Will ye walk to the house with me?" said the former; and when I glanced at him, Cotton, stooping, pretended to examine his carbine. Thorn appeared suspicious, for he dropped the lines he held, and his eyes grew keen.

"I'm sorry that is the one thing I can't do just now, when every moment of this weather is precious," I said. "If you can't wait until we stop at noon, there's no apparent reason why you shouldn't state your business here."

"Ye had better come," said Mackay, looking very wooden. "Forby, I'm thinking ye will sow no more to-day."

"I'm not in the humor for joking, and intend to continue sowing until it is too dark to see," I answered shortly. "Have you any authority to prevent me?"

"I have," said the Sergeant. "Well, if ye will have it—authority to arrest ye on a charge of unlawfully burning the homestead of Gaspard's Trail."

Astonishment, dismay, and anger held me dumb between them for a few moments. Then, as the power of speech returned, I said: "Confound you, Mackay! You don't think I could possibly have had any hand in that?"

"It's no' my business to think," was the dry answer; "I'm here to carry out orders. What was it ye were observing, foreman Thorn?"

"Only that Niven or Lane was a mighty long time finding this thing out; and that, while nobody expects too much from the police, we never figured they were clean, stark, raging lunatics," said Thorn.

"I'm no' expecting compliments," said Mackay. "Ye will do your duty, Corporal Cotton."

"You can put that thing back. I'm not a wild beast, and have sense enough to see that I must wait for satisfaction until some of your chiefs at headquarters hear of your smartness," I said. Then Cotton positively hung his head as he let the carbine slip back into its holster, while Mackay stared after the departing Thorn, who made for the homestead as fast as he could run.

"What is his business?" he said.

"His own!" I answered shortly. "Unless you have also a warrant for his arrest, it would be injudicious of you to stop him. Thorn has an ugly temper, and would be justified in resenting the interference. What is your programme?"

"To ride in to the rail whenever ye are ready, and deliver ye safely in Empress City."

"I suppose one can only make the best of it; but considering that you were probably consulted before a warrant was issued, I can't help feeling astonished," I said. "However, there is no use wasting words, and an hour will suffice me to get ready in."

I left the team standing before the seeder, careless as to what became of them, for, even if acquitted, I felt that my career was closed at last. No forced labor could make up for time lost now, and, because justice in the West is slow, it was perfectly clear why the charge had been made. There was a scene with Sally when we reached the homestead, and Cotton fled before her biting comments upon police sagacity. Even Mackay winced under certain allusions, and when I asked him: "Am I permitted to talk to my housekeeper alone?" assented readily.

"Ye may," he said, "and welcome; I do not envy ye."

If Sally's tongue could be venomous, her brain was keen, and, as Steel was absent, it was with confidence I left instructions with her. Thorn had vanished completely, and the girl only looked mysterious when questioned concerning him. At length all was ready, and turning in the saddle as we rode away, I waved my hat to Sally, who stood in the doorway of the homestead with eyes suspiciously dim. I wondered, with a strange lack of interest, whether I should ever see either it or her again. Cotton also saluted her, and the girl suddenly moved forward a pace, holding up her hand.

"Make sure of your prisoner, Sergeant," she said. "What's the use of talking justice to the poor man when he's ground down by the thief with capital? We're getting tired—we have waited for that justice so long—and I give you and the fools or rogues behind you warning that if you jail Ormesby, the boys will come for him with rifles a hundred strong."

Mackay touched his beast with the spurs, and as we passed out of earshot, said to me: "If the boys have her spirit I'm thinking it's not impossible. Your friends are not judicious, Henry Ormesby."

"They are stanch, at least, and above being bought," I said; and Mackay stiffened.

"What were ye meaning?"

"I think my meaning was plain enough," I answered him.

Many leagues divided us from the railroad, and the way seemed very long. The dejection that settled upon me brought a physical lassitude with it, and I rode wearily, jolting in the saddle before the journey was half done. Since the memorable night at Bonaventure, when I first met Boone, trouble after trouble had crowded upon me, and, supported by mere obstinacy when hope had gone, I still held on. Now it seemed the end had come, and, at the best, I must retire beaten to earn a daily wage by the labor of my hands if I escaped conviction as a felon. Lane would absorb Crane Valley, as he had done Gaspard's Trail. As if in mockery the prairie had donned its gayest robe of green, and lay flooded with cloudless sunshine.

Mackay made no further advances since my last repulse, but rode silently on my right hand, Cotton on my left, holding back a little so that I could not see him, and so birch bluff, willows, and emerald levels rolled up before us and slid back to the prairie's rim until, towards dusk on the second day, cubes of wooden houses and a line of gaunt telegraph poles loomed up ahead.

"I'm glad," said Corporal Cotton, breaking into speech at last. "I don't know if you'll believe it, Ormesby, but this has been a sickening day to me. I'm tired of the confounded service—I'm tired of everything."

"Ye're young and tender on the bit, and without the sense to go canny when it galls ye. What ails ye at the service any way?" interposed the Sergeant.

"I'll say nothing about some of the duties. They're a part of the contract," answered Cotton.

"Still, I never bargained to arrest my best friends when I became a policeman."

"Friends!" said Mackay. "Who were ye meaning?" and Cotton turned in my direction with the face of one who had narrowly escaped a blunder.

"Aren't you asking useless questions? I mean Rancher Ormesby."

"I observed ye used the plural," said Mackay.

Cotton answered shortly: "When one is going through a disgusting duty to the best of his ability, he may be forgiven a trifling lapse in grammar."

The light was failing as we rode up to the station, some time before the train was due, and looking back I saw several diminutive objects on the edge of the prairie. They were, I surmised, mounted settlers coming in for letters or news, but except that the blaze of crimson behind them forced them up, it would have been hard to recognize the shapes of men and beasts. Round the other half of the circle the waste was fading into the dimness that crept up from the east, and feeling that I had probably done with the prairie, and closed another chapter of my life, I turned my eyes towards the string of giant poles and little railroad depot ahead.

There were fewer loungers than usual about it, but when we dismounted, Cotton started as two feminine figures strolled side by side down the platform, and said something softly under his breath.

"What has surprised you?" I asked, and he pointed towards the pair.

"Those are Haldane's daughters, by all that is unfortunate!"

There was no avoiding the meeting. Darkness had not settled yet, and Mackay, who failed to recognize the ladies, was regarding us impatiently. "I'll do my best, and they may not notice anything suspicious," the Corporal said.

We moved forward, Mackay towards the office, Cotton hanging behind me, but, as ill-luck would have it, both ladies saw us when we reached the track, and before I could recover from my dismay, I stood face to face with Beatrice Haldane. She was, it seemed to me, more beautiful than ever, but I longed that the earth might open beneath me.

"It is some time since I have seen you, and you do not look well," she said. "You once described the Western winters as invigorating; but one could almost fancy the last had been too much for you."

"I cannot say the same thing, and if we had nothing more than the weather to contend with, we might preserve our health," I said. "I did not know you were at Bonaventure, or I would have ridden over to pay my respects to you."

Beatrice Haldane did not say whether this would have given her pleasure or otherwise. Indeed, her manner, if slightly cordial, was nothing more, and I found it desirable to study a rail fastening when I saw her sister watching me.

"I only arrived from the East a few days ago, and we are now awaiting my father, who had some business down the line. Are you going out with the train?"

"I am going to Empress," I said; and Lucille Haldane interposed: "That is a long way; and the last time he met you, you told father you were too busy to visit Bonaventure. Who will see to your sowing—and will you stay there long?"

I heard Corporal Cotton grind his heel viciously into the plank beneath him; and answered, in desperation: "I do not know. I am afraid so."

Perhaps the girl noticed by my voice that all was not well. Indeed, Beatrice also commenced to regard the Corporal and myself curiously.

"What has happened, Mr. Ormesby? You look positively haggard?" the younger sister said. "Why are you keeping in the background? Have you done anything to be ashamed of, Corporal Cotton?" Then she ceased with a gasp of pained surprise, and I read consternation in her eyes.

"You have guessed aright. I am not making this journey of my own will," I said.

Beatrice Haldane turned with a swift movement, which brought us once more fully face to face, and, unlike her sister, she was strangely cold and grave.

"Is it permissible to ask any questions?" she said, and her even tone stung me to the quick. One whisper against the speaker would have roused me to fury.

"Everybody will know to-morrow or the next day, and I may as well tell you now," I said, in a voice which sounded, even in my own ears, hoarse with bitterness. "I am to be tried for burning down the homestead of Gaspard's Trail."

Beatrice Haldane certainly showed surprise, but she seemed more thoughtful than indignant, and still fixed me with her eyes. They were clear and very beautiful, but I had begun to wonder if a spark of human passion would ever burn within them.

"It is absurd—preposterous. Come here at once, Sergeant," a clear young voice with a thrill of unmistakable anger in it said; but Mackay seemed desirous of backing into the station agent's office instead.

"I want you," added Lucille Haldane. "Come at once, and tell me why you have done this."

The Sergeant's courage was evidently unequal to the task, for with a brief: "I will try to satisfy ye when I have transacted my business," he disappeared into the office, and I turned again to Beatrice Haldane.

"You see it is unfortunately true; but you do not appear astonished," I said.

Beatrice Haldane looked at me sharply, but without indignation, for she was always mistress of herself, and before she could speak her sister broke in: "Do you wish to make us angry, when we are only sorry for you, Mr. Ormesby? Everybody knows that neither yourself nor any rancher in this district could be guilty. Corporal Cotton, will you inquire if your superior has finished his business, and tell him that I am waiting?"

"The old heathen deserves it!" said Cotton aside to me, as, with unfeigned relief, he hurried away, and it was only by an effort I refrained from following him. The interview was growing painful in the extreme. Still, I was respited, for Beatrice Haldane turned from us suddenly.

"What can this mean? There is a troop of horsemen riding as for their lives towards the depot," she said.

It was growing dark, but not too dark to see a band of mounted men converge at a gallop upon the station, and for the first time I noticed how the loungers stared at them, and heard the jingle of harness and thud of drumming hoofs. None of them shouted or spoke. They came on in ominous silence, the spume flakes flying from the lathered beasts, the clods whirling up, until a voice cried: "Two of you stand by to hold the train up. The rest will come along with me!"

Amid a musical jingling, the horses were pulled up close beside the track, and men in embroidered deerskin with broad white hats, and men in old blue jean leapt hurriedly down. Several carried rifles, while, guessing their purpose, I pointed towards the frame houses across the unfenced track. "You must go at once, Miss Haldane. There may be a tumult," I said.

Lucille seemed reluctant, Beatrice by no means hurried, and I do not remember whether I bade either of them farewell, for as the newcomers came swiftly into the station a gaunt commanding figure holding a carbine barred their way, and Corporal Cotton leapt out from the office. The station agent, holding a revolver, also placed himself between them and me.

"What are ye wanting, boys?" a steady voice asked; and the men halted within a few paces of the carbine's muzzle. I could just see that they were friends and neighbors of my own, and also noticed that one who rode up and down the track seemed inclined to civilly prevent the ladies retiring to the wooden settlement. Perhaps he feared they intended to raise its inhabitnants.

"We want Harry Ormesby," answered a voice I recognized as belonging to Steel. "Stand out of the daylight, Sergeant. We have no call to hurt you."

"I'm thinking that's true," said Mackay; and I admired his coolness as he stood alone, save for the young corporal, grimly eyeing the crowd. "It will, however, be my distressful duty to damage the first of ye who moves a foot nearer my prisoner. Noo will ye hear reason, boys, or will I wire for a squadron to convince ye? Ormesby ye cannot have, and will ye shame your own credit and me?"

There was a murmur of consultation, but no disorderly clamor. The men whom Thorn had raised to rescue me were neither habitual brawlers nor desperadoes, but sturdy stockriders and tillers of the soil, smarting under a sense of oppression. They were all of them fearless, and would, I know, have faced a cavalry brigade to uphold what appeared their rights, but were equally averse to any bloodshed or violence that was not necessary.

"There's no use talking, Sergeant," somebody said. "We don't go back without our man, and it will be better for all of us if you release him. You know as well as we do there's nothing against him."

Meantime, I could not well interfere without precipitating a crisis. The station agent, who stated that Mackay had deputed him authority, stood beside me with the pistol in his hand. Neither was I certain what my part would be, for stung to white heat by Beatrice Haldane's coldness which suggested suspicion, and came as the climax of a series of injuries, I wondered whether it might not be better to make a dash for liberty and leave the old hard life behind me. There might be better fortune beyond the Rockies, and I felt that Lane would not have instigated the charge of arson unless he saw his way to substantiate it.

Nevertheless, I could watch the others with a strange and almost impersonal curiosity—the group of men standing with hard hands on the rifle barrels ready for a rush; the grim figure of the sergeant, and the young corporal poised with head held high, left foot flung forward, and carbine at hip, in front of them.

"We'll give you two minutes to make up your mind in. Then, if you can't climb down, and anything unpleasant happens, it will be upon your head. Can't you see you haven't the ghost of a show?" said one.

Turning my eyes a moment, I noticed a fan-shaped flicker swinging like a comet across the dusky waste far down the straight-ruled track, and when a man I knew held up his watch beneath a lamp, had almost come to a decision. If the sergeant had shown any sign of weakness it is perhaps possible that decision might have been reversed; but Mackay stood as though cast in iron, and equally unyielding. I would at least have no bloodshed on my account, and leave my friends to bear the consequences of their unthinking generosity. Meantime, stockrider and teamster were waiting in strained attention, and there was still almost a minute left to pass when a light hand touched my shoulder, and Lucille Haldane, appearing from behind me, said: "You must do something. Go forward and speak to them immediately." She was trembling with eagerness, but the station agent stood on my other side, and he was woodenly stolid.

"Put down that weapon. I will speak to them," I said.

"You're healthier here," was the suspicious answer; and, chiefly conscious of the appeal and anxiety in Lucille Haldane's face, I turned upon him.

"Stand out of my way—confound you!" I shouted.

The man fingered the pistol uncertainly, and I could have laughed at his surmise that the sight of it would have held me then. Before, even if he wished it, his finger could close on the trigger, I had him by the wrist, and the weapon fell with a clash. Then I lifted him bodily, and flung him upon the track, while, as amid a shouting Cotton sprang forward, Mackay roared: "Bide ye, let him go!"

The shouting ceased suddenly when I stood between my friends and the sergeant with hands held up. "I'll never forget what you have done, boys; but it is no use," I said; and paused to gather breath, amid murmurs of surprise and consternation. "In the first place, I can't drag you into this trouble."

"We'll take the chances willing," a voice said, and there was a grim chorus of approval. "We've borne enough, and it's time we did something."

"Can't you see that if I bolted now it would suit nobody better than Lane? Boys, you know I'm innocent——"

Again a clamor broke out, and somebody cried: "It was Lane's own man who did it, if anybody fired Gaspard's Trail!"

"He may not be able to convict me, and if instead of rushing the sergeant you will go home and help Thorn with the sowing, we may beat him yet," I continued. "Even if I am convicted, I'll come back again, and stay right here until Lane is broken, or one of us is dead."

The hoot of a whistle cut me short, the brightening blaze of a great head-lamp beat into our faces, and further speech was out of the question as with brakes groaning the lighted cars clanged in.

"Be quick, Sergeant, before they change their minds!" I shouted, and Mackay and Cotton scrambled after me on to a car platform. No train which ever entered that station had, I think, so prompt dispatch, for Cotton had hardly opened the door of the vestibule than the bell clanged, and the huge locomotive snorted as the cars rolled out. I had a momentary vision of the agent, who seemed partly dazed, scowling in my direction, a group of dark figures swinging broad-brimmed hats, and Lucille Haldane standing on the edge of the platform to wave her hand to me. Then the lights faded behind us, and we swept out, faster and faster, across the prairie.

XX.

LEADEN-FOOTED JUSTICE.

I HAD spent a number of weary days awaiting trial, when a visitor was announced, and a young, smooth-shaven man shown into my quarters. He nodded to me pleasantly, seated himself on the edge of the table and commenced: "Your friends sent me along. I hope to see you through this trouble, Rancher, and want you to tell me exactly how your difficulties began. Think of all the little things that didn't strike you as quite usual."

"I should like to hear in the first place who you are. I know your name is Dixon, but that does not convey very much," I said.

The stranger laughed good-humoredly. "And such is fame! Now I had fancied everybody who read the papers knew my name, and that I had won some small reputation down at Winnipeg. Anyway, I'm generally sent for in cases with a financial origin."

Then I remembered, and looked hard at the speaker. The last sentence was justified, but he differed greatly from one's idea of the typical lawyer. He was not even neatly dressed, and his manner singularly lacked the preciseness of the legal practitioner.

"I must apologize, for I certainly have read about you," I said. "It was perhaps natural that as I did not send for you I should be surprised at your taking an interest in my case. I am, however, afraid I cannot retain you, for the simple reason that I don't know where to raise sufficient dollars to recompense any capable man's services."

"Aren't you a little premature? My clients don't usually plead poverty until I send in my bill," was the answer. "You own a tolerably extensive holding in Crane Valley, don't you?"

"I do; but nobody, except one man whom I would not deal with, would buy a yard of it just now," I answered. Then acceding to the other's request I supported the statement by a brief account of my circumstances. "All this is quite beside the question," I concluded.

"No!" said Dixon. "As a matter of fact I find it interesting. Won't you go on and bring the story down to the present?"

I did so, and the man's face had changed, growing intent and keen before I concluded.

"I should rather like to manage this affair for you," he said. "My fees!—well, from what one or two people said about you, I can, if necessary, wait for them."

"You will probably never be paid. Who was it sent for you?"

"Charles Steel, who was, however, not quite so frank about finances as you seem to be," was the answer. "It was also curious, or otherwise, that I was also requested to see what could be done by two other gentlemen who offered to guarantee expenses, in the meantime, which is about as much as I may tell you. You are not the only person with an interest in the future of the Crane Valley district."

"I seem to be used as a stalking-horse by friends and enemies alike, and get the benefit of the charges each time they miss their aim. The part grows irksome," I said drily. "However, if you are willing to take the risks, I need capable assistance badly enough."

Dixon seemed quite willing, and asked further questions. "You seem a little bitter against the sergeant. What kind of man is he?" he said. "I mean, has he a tolerably level head, or is he one of the discipline-made machines who can comprehend nothing not included in their code of rules?"

"I used to think him singularly shrewd, but recent events have changed my opinion, and you had better place him in the latter category," I said; and Dixon chuckled over something.

"Very natural! I must see him. From what you said already he doesn't strike me as a fool. Well, I don't think you need worry yourself too much, Mr. Ormesby."

Dixon had resumed his careless manner before he took himself away, and, for no particular reason, left me comforted. We had several more interviews before the trial began, and I can vividly remember the morning I was summoned into court. It was packed to suffocation, and the brilliant sunshine that beat in through the long windows fell upon faces which I knew. Their owners were mostly poor men, and I surmised had covered the long distance on horseback, sleeping on the prairie, to encourage me. There was, indeed, a suppressed demonstration when I took my stand which brought a quicker throb to my pulses and a glow into my face. It was comforting to know that I had their approbation and sympathy. If the life I remembered, and had caught brief glimpses of, at Bonaventure was not for me, these hard-handed, tireless men were my equals and friends—and I was proud of them.

So it was in a clear, defiant voice, I pleaded "Not guilty!" and presently composed myself to listen while Sergeant Mackay detailed my arrest. Bronzed faces were turned anxiously upon him when he was asked: "Did the prisoner volunteer any statement, or offer resistance?"

Mackay looked down on the men before him, and there was a significant silence in the body of the court. Then, with a faint twinkle in his eyes, he answered: "There was a bit demonstration at the depot in the prisoner's favor, but he assisted us in maintaining order. The charge, he said, was ridiculous."

This I considered was a liberal view to take of what had passed, and my own comments, and though knowing that Mackay was never addicted to unfairly making the most of an advantage, I remembered Dixon's opinion. If he was actuated by any ulterior motive I had, however, no inkling of what it might be.

Nothing of much further importance passed until the man who had preferred the charge against me took his stand; when, watching him intently, I was puzzled by his attitude. He appeared irresolute, though I felt tolerably certain that his indecision was quite untinged with compunction on my account. He had also a sullen look, which suggested one driven against his will, and, twice before he spoke, made a slight swift movement as though under the impulse of a changed resolution.

"I am the owner of the lands and remains of the homestead known as Gaspard's Trail," he said. "I bought them at public auction when sold by the gentleman who held the prisoner's mortgage. Twice that day the latter threatened both of us, and his friends raised a hostile demonstration. He told me to take care of myself and the property, for he would live to see me sorry; but I didn't count much on that. Thought he was only talking when naturally a little mad. Have had cause to change my opinions since. I turned in early on the night of the fire, and slept well, I and my hired man, Wilkins, being the only folks in the house. He wakened me about 2 A. M. 'Get up at once. Somebody has fired the place,' he said.

"I got up—in a mighty hurry—and got out my valuables. One end of the house was most red-hot. There wasn't much furniture in it. The prisoner had cleared out most everything, whether it was in the mortgage schedule or whether it was not; but there was enough to keep me busy while Wilkins lit out to save the horses. Wind blew the sparks right on to the stable. I went out when I'd saved what I could, and as Wilkins had been gone a long time, concluded he'd make sure of the horses. Met the prisoner when I was carrying tools out of a threatened shed. Asked him to help me. "I'll see you burned before I stir a hand,' he said. Noticed he was skulking round the corner of a shed, and seemed kind of startled at the sight of me, but was too rattled to think of much just then. Didn't ask him anything more, but seeing the fire had taken hold good, sat down and watched it. Yes, sir, I told somebody it wasn't insured.

"By-and-by the prisoner came back with a dozen ranchers. Didn't seem friendly, or even civil, most of them, and there was nothing I could do. Then I got worried about Wilkins, for he'd been gone a long time, and the stable was burning bad. One of the ranchers said he'd make sure there were no beasts inside it, and the prisoner and the rest went along. They found Wilkins with some bones broken, and got him and the horses out between them. Then, when the place was burned out, Sergeant Mackay rode up. I was homeless; but none of the ranchers would take me in. Somebody said he wasn't sorry, and I'd got my deserts. Believe it was the prisoner; but can't be certain. That's all I know except that before I turned in I saw all the lamps out and fixed up the stove. Am certain the fire didn't start from them.

"I was hunting among the ruins with Wilkins a little while ago when I found a flattened coal-oil-tin under some fallen beams in the kitchen. I never used that oil, but heard at the railroad store that the prisoner did. Mightn't have taken the trouble to inquire, but that I found close beside it a silver match-box. It was pretty well worn, but anyone who will look at it close can read that it was given to H. Ormesby. Considering the prisoner must have dropped it there, I handed both to the police."

When Niven mentioned the match-box, I started as though struck by a bullet. It was mine, undoubtedly, and most of my neighbors had seen it. That it was damning evidence in conjunction with the oil tin, and had been deliberately placed there for my undoing, I felt certain. There was a half-audible murmur in the court while the judge examined the articles, and I read traces of bewilderment and doubt in the faces turned towards me. That these men should grow suspicious, roused me to a sense of unbearable injury, and I sent my voice ringing through the court. "It is an infamous lie. I lost the match-box, or it was stolen from me with a purpose, a month after the fire."

The judge dropped his note-book, the prosecutor smiled significantly; but I saw that the men from the prairie believed me, and that was very comforting. Something resembling a subdued cheer rose from various parts of the building.

"Silence!" said the judge sternly. "An interruption is neither admissible nor seemly, prisoner. You will be called upon in turn."

"We need not trouble about the prisoner's denial, which was perhaps natural, if useless, because the witness's statement will be fully borne out by the man who was present when he found the match-box," said the lawyer for the Crown. "I will now call Sergeant Mackay again."

Mackay's terse testimony was damaging, and aroused my further indignation. I had not expected that he would either conceal or enlarge upon anything that would tell against me; but had anticipated some trace of reluctance, or that he would wait longer for questions between his admissions. Instead, he stood rigidly erect, and reeled off his injurious testimony more like a speaking automaton than a human being.

"A trooper warned me that he had seen a reflected blaze in the sky," he said. "We mounted and rode over to Gaspard's Trail. Arriving there I found a number of men including the owner, Niven, and the prisoner. Niven said the place was not insured. They were unable to do anything. I see no need to describe the fire. The house was past saving; but the ranchers, with the prisoner among them, broke into the burning stable to bring out the horses which had been overlooked, and found the hired man, Wilkins, partly suffocated in a stall. He was badly injured, but bore out the owner's statement that lamps and stove were safe when they retired.

"I proceeded to question the spectators. Knew them all as men of good character, and as they had newly ridden in, saw no reason to suspect more than one in case the fire was not accidental. Asked Niven who he first met, and he said it was the prisoner, shortly after the fire broke out. Stated he met him slipping through the shadow of a shed, and the prisoner refused to assist him. Was not surprised at this, knowing the prisoner bore Niven little goodwill since the latter bought his property. Had heard him threaten him and another man supposed to be connected with him in the purchase of Gaspard's Trail."

"What reason have you to infer that any other man was concerned in the purchase of Gaspard's Trail?" asked the prosecutor; and Mackay answered indifferently:

"It was just popular opinion that he was finding Niven the money."

"We need not trouble about popular opinion," said the lawyer somewhat hurriedly. "We will now proceed to the testimony of the hired man, Thomas Wilkins."

Thomas Wilkins was called for several times, but failed to present himself, and a trooper who hurried out of court came back with the tidings that he had borrowed a horse at the hotel and ridden out on the prairie an hour ago. Since then nobody had seen him.

The Crown prosecutor fidgeted, the judge frowned, and there was a whispering in the court until the former rose up: "As Wilkins is one of my principal witnesses, I must suggest an adjournment."

It cost me an effort to repress an exclamation. I had already been kept long enough in suspense, and suspecting that Wilkins did not mean to return, knew that a lengthened adjournment would be almost equally disastrous as a sentence.

"Have you no information whatever as to why he has absented himself?" asked the judge. Receiving a negative answer, he turned towards the trooper: "What did you hear exactly at the hotel?"

"Very little, sir," was the answer. "He didn't tell anybody where he was going, but just rode out. The hotel keeper said he guessed Wilkins had something on his mind by the way he kicked things about last night."

"It will be the business of the police to find him as speedily as possible. Meantime, I can only adjourn the case until they do, unless the prisoner's representative proceeds with the examination of witnesses," said the judge.

Dixon was on his feet in a moment. "With the exception of Sergeant Mackay and the witness Niven, who will be further required by my legal friend, I do not purpose to trouble the witnesses," he said. "While I can urge no reasonable objection to the adjournment, it is necessary to point out that it will inflict a grievous injury upon one whom I have every hope of showing is a wholly innocent man. It is well known that this is the one time in the year when the prairie rancher's energies are taxed to the uttermost, and the loss of even a few days now may entail the loss of the harvest or the ruin of the stock. My client has also suffered considerably from being brought here to answer what I cannot help describing as an unwarranted charge, and it is only reasonable that bail should be allowed."

"Is anyone willing to offer security?" asked the judge.

There was a few moments' silence, and then a hum of subdued voices as a man rose up; while I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw it was Boone. In spite of the slight change in his appearance, he must have been aware that he was running a serious risk, for his former holding lay almost within a long day's journey. I could also see that some of the spectators started as they recognized him.

"I shall be glad to offer security for the prisoner's reappearance, so far as my means will serve," he said.

"You are a citizen of this place, or have some local standing?" asked the judge.

Boone answered carelessly: "I can hardly claim so much; but a good many people know me further west, and I am prepared to submit my bank-book as a guarantee."

He had scarcely finished, when another man I had not noticed earlier stood up in turn. "I am authorized by Carson Haldane, of Bonaventure, to offer bail to any extent desired."

The judge beckoned both of them to sit down again, and called up a commissioned police officer and Sergeant Mackay. Then I felt slightly hopeful, guessing that a good deal depended upon Mackay's opinion. The others drew aside, and my heart throbbed fast with the suspense until the judge announced his decision.

"As the charge is a serious one, and the police hope to find the missing witness very shortly, I must, in the meantime, refuse to allow bail."

I had grown used to the crushing disappointment which follows short-lived hope; but the shock was hard to meet. It seemed only too probable that Lane or his emissaries had spirited Wilkins away, and would not produce him until it was too late to save my crop. Still, there was no help for it, and I followed the officer who led me back to my quarters with the best air of stolidity I could assume.

"What did you think of it?" asked Dixon, who came in presently with a smile upon his face; and I answered ruefully: "The less said the better. It strikes me as the beginning of the final catastrophe, and if Wilkins substantiates the finding of the match-box, conviction must follow. What is the usual term of detention for such offences?"

"You needn't worry about that," was the cheerful answer. "Things are going just about as well as they could. There'll be a second adjournment, and then perhaps another."

"And I must lie here indefinitely while my crops and cattle go to ruin! That is hardly my idea of things going well; and if you are jesting, it is precious poor humor," I broke in.

Dixon laughed. "I am not jesting in the least. You seem to be one of those folks, Ormesby, who believe everything will go to ruin unless they hold control themselves. Now it would not surprise me, if, on your return, you found your crops and cattle flourishing. Further, the prosecution holds a poor case, and I expect, when my turn comes, to see it collapse. There isn't so much as you might fancy in the match-box incident. The men who burn down places don't generally leave such things about. I have had a talk with the sergeant, and though he's closer than an oyster, begin to catch a glimmering of his intentions."

"Why can't you explain them then? I'm growing tired of hints, and feel tempted to tell my mysterious well-wishers to go to the devil together, and leave me in peace," I said.

"A little ill-humor is perhaps excusable," was the tranquil answer. "It is wisest not to prophesy until one is sure, you know. Now I'm open, as I said, to do my best for you; but in that case you have just got to let me set about it independently. Usual or otherwise, it is my way."

"Then I suppose I'll have to let you. Your reputation should be a guarantee," I answered moodily, and Dixon lifted his hat from the table.

"Thanks!" he said drily. "It is in fact the only sensible thing you can do."

XXI.

AGAINST TIME.

Dixon's prediction proved correct. When I was brought into court a second time there was still no news of Wilkins, and after further testimony of no importance the case was again adjourned. This time, however, bail was allowed, and Boone and Rancher Gordon stood surety for me. The latter was by no means rich, and had, like the rest of us, suffered severe losses of late. Dixon was the first to greet me when I went forth, somewhat moodily, a free man for the time being.

"You don't look either so cheerful or grateful as you ought to be," he said.

"You are wrong in one respect. I am at least sincerely grateful for your efforts."

Dixon, in defiance of traditions, smote me on the shoulder. "Then what's the matter with the cheerfulness?"

"It is not exactly pleasant to have a charge of this description hanging over one indefinitely, and I have already lost time which can never be made up," I said. "Lane will no doubt produce his witness when he considers it opportune, and there is small encouragement to work in the prospect of spending a lengthy time in jail while one's possessions go to ruin."

"You think Lane had a hand in his disappearance?" Dixon asked thoughtfully; and when I nodded, commented, "I can't quite say I do. My reasons are not conclusive, and human nature's curious, any way; but I'm not sure that Wilkins will, if he can help it, turn up at all. However, in the meantime, the dinner we're both invited to will put heart into you."

He slipped his arm through my mine, and led me into the leading hotel, where, as it was drawing near the time for the six o'clock supper, every man turned to stare at us as we passed through the crowded bar and vestibule. I was making for the general dining-room when Dixon said: "Go straight ahead. It was not easy to manage, but our hosts were determined to do the thing in style."

He flung a door open, and Boone and Gordon greeted me in turn, while I had never seen a menu in a Western hostelry to compare with that of the following meal. Perhaps Gordon noticed my surprise, for he said: "It was Adams who fixed up all this, and came near a scrimmage with the hotel-keeper about the wine. 'This comes from California, and I prefer it grown in France. Those labels aren't much use to any man with a sense of taste,' says he. This brand, wherever they grow it is quite good enough for me, but I'm wondering where Adams learned the difference."

Boone smiled at me. "I have," he said, "a good memory, and learned a number of useful things during a somewhat varied experience."

The meal was over and the blue cigar smoke curled about us when I turned to Gordon: "There are two things I would like to ask you. First, and because I know what losses you have had to face, how you raised the money to liberate me in the generous way you did; and how many acres are left unsown at Crane Valley?"

The gaunt rancher fidgeted before he answered: "You have said 'Thank you' once, and I guess that's enough. You're so blame thin in the hide, and touchy, Ormesby; and it wasn't me who did it—at least not much of it."

Dixon appeared to be amused, and when Gordon glanced appealingly at Boone, the latter only smiled and shook his head; seeing which, I said quietly: "In short, you sent round the hat?"

There was no doubt that the chance shot had told, for Gordon rose, very red in face, to his feet. "That's just what I didn't. Don't you know us yet? Send round the hat when the boys knew you were innocent and just how I was fixed! No, sir. They came right in, each bringing his roll of bills with him, and if I'd wanted twice as much they'd have raised it. And now I've given them away—just what they made me promise not to."

I had anticipated the answer, but it stirred me, nevertheless, and while Gordon stared at me half-angry, half-ashamed of his own vehemence, filled a wine-glass to the brim. "Here's to the finest men and staunchest comrades on God's green earth," I said, looking steadily at him.

It was Dixon who brought us down to our normal level, for, setting his glass down empty, he commented: "You're not over modest, Ormesby, considering that you are one of them. Still, I think you're right. Folks down East are expecting a good deal from you and the good country that has been given you."

Gordon joined in the lawyer's laugh, but I broke in: "You have not answered my second question."

"Well!" and the rancher smiled mischievously. "You're so mighty particular that I don't know what to say. Still, things looked pretty tolerable last time I was down to Crane Valley."

Dixon accompanied us to the station when it was time to catch the train, and as he stood on the car platform said to me: "It's probably no use telling you not to worry, but I'd sit tight in my saddle and think as little as possible about this trouble if I were you."

He dropped lightly from the platform, cigar in hand, as the train pulled out, and, though most unlike the traditional lawyer in speech or agility, left me with a reassuring confidence in his skill.

It was early morning when I rode alone towards Crane Valley, feeling, in spite of Dixon's good advice, distinctly anxious. It is true that Thorn and Steel were both energetic, but no man can drive two teams at once, and it was my impression that, having more at stake, I could do considerably more in person than either of them. The reflection, that, after all, the question how much had been accomplished was immaterial, because there was little use sowing where, while I lay in jail, an enemy might reap, brought small comfort, and I urged my horse when I drew near the hollow wherein the homestead lay, and then pulled him up with a jerk. Gordon had said things had been going tolerably well, but this proved a very inadequate description. The ploughed land had all been harrowed and sown, and beyond it lay the shattered clods of fresh breaking, where I guessed oats had been sown under the sod newly torn from the virgin prairie. Ten men of greater endurance could not have accomplished so much, and I sat still, humbled and very grateful, with eyes which grew momentarily dim, fixed on the wide stretch of black soil steaming under the morning sun. It seemed as though a beneficent genie had been working for my deliverance while I lay, almost despairing, in the grip of the law.

Then Steel, springing out of the door of the sod-house, came up, with Thorn behind him, at a run. It was strangely pleasant to see the elation in their honest faces, and Steel's shout of delight sent a thrill through me.

"This is the best sight I've seen since you left us," he panted, wringing my hand. "Thorn's that full up with satisfaction he can't even run. We knew Dixon and Adams would see you through between them."

"Has Dixon been down here?" I asked, for the lawyer had not told me so; and Thorn, who came up, gasped: "'Oh, yes; and a Winnipeg man he sent down went round with Adams most everywhere. Say, did you strike Niven for compensation?"

"No," I answered, a trifle ruefully. "I am only free on bail, and not acquitted yet."

Steel's jaw dropped, and his dismay would have been ludicrous had it not betrayed his whole-hearted friendship, while Thorn's burst of sulphurous language was an even more convincing testimony. Again I felt a curious humility, and something enlarged in my throat as I looked down on them.

"If I can't stand Lane off with you two and the rest behind me I shall deserve all I get, and we must hope for the best," I said. "But if you could handle three teams each you could not have done all this."

Thorn, who was not usually vociferous in expressing his sentiments, appeared glad of this diversion, and, after glancing at the ploughed land, strove to smile humorously. "Think you could have done it any better yourself?"

"It's a fair hit," I answered. "You know exactly how much I can do. Let me down easily. How did you manage it?"

"We didn't manage anything," said Thorn. "No, sir. The boys, they did it all. Everybody came or sent a hired man, and blame quaint ploughing some of them cow-chasers done. Put up a dollar sweepstake and ran races with the harrows, they did, and Steel talked himself purple before he stopped them. They've busted the gang-plough, and one said he ought to have been a dentist by the way he pulled out the cultivator teeth."

"And where did you come in?" I asked, and duly noted the effort it cost Steel to follow his comrade's lead.

"We just lay back and turned the good advice on," he said. "Tom, he led the prayer meeting when, after supper, they turned loose on Lane. Oh, yes, we rode in and out for provisions. Sally, she would have the best in the settlement, and sat up all night cooking. Don't know how you'll feel when you see the grocery bill."

"I can tell you now," I said. "I feel that there's nothing in the whole Dominion too good for them—

or you—and I'd be glad, if necessary, to sell my shirt to pay the bill."

We went on to the house together, and Sally, hiding her disappointment, plunged with very kindly intentions into a spirited description of her visitors' feats. "That's a testimonial," she said, pointing through the window to an appalling pile of empty tins. "I just had to get them when some of the boys brought their own provisions in. I set one of them peeling potatoes all night to convince him."

"Peeling potatoes?" I interpolated; and Steel, smiling wickedly, furnished the explanation.

"Sally was busy in the shed when he came along, and wanted to help her considerable. 'Feel like peeling half a sackful?' says Sally; and when the fool stockman allowed he'd like it better than anything, says she: 'Then, as I'm tired, you can.' She just left him with it, while she talked to the other man; but there was grit in him, and he peeled away until morning. Wanted to marry her, too, he did."

Sally's glance foreboded future tribulation for the speaker, and Thorn frowned; but Steel, disregarding it, concluded gravely: "Dessay he might have done, but he heard Sally turn loose on me one day and took warning."

In spite of the shadow hanging over me it was good to be at home, and perhaps the very uncertainty as to its duration made the somewhat sordid struggle of our life at Crane Valley almost attractive. Lane, it seemed only too probable, would crush us in the end, but there was satisfaction in the thought that every hour's work well done would help us to prolong our resistance. So the days of effort slipped by until I received a notice to present myself at court on a specified date, and, there being much to do, delayed my departure until the last day. Steel insisted on accompanying me to the railroad, but protested against the time of starting. "One might fancy you were fond of jail by the hurry you're in to get back to it," he said. "We could catch the cars if we left hours later."

"It's as well to be on the right side," I said; for I had been in a state of nervous impatience all day. Wilkins had been found, and now a decision appeared certain I grew feverishly anxious to learn the best—or worst.

It was a day of early summer when we set out and pushed on at a good pace, though already the sun shone hot. Steel, indeed, suggested there was no need for haste, but after checking my beast a little I shot ahead again. "It might be your wedding you were going to!" he said.

We had covered part of the distance left to traverse on the second day when a freighter's lumbering ox-team crawled out of a ravine, and Steel pulled up beside him. "I don't know if you're mailing anything East, but you're late if you are," said the teamster.

"Then there's something wrong with the sun," said Steel. "If he's keeping his time bill we're most two hours too soon."

"You would have been last week," answered the other; while a sudden chill struck through me as I remembered the promised acceleration of the transcontinental express. "They've improved the track in the Selkirks sooner than they expected, and they're rushing the Atlantic hummer through on the new schedule this month instead of next."

Before he concluded I had snatched out my watch and simultaneously touched the beast with the spurs. Next moment the timepiece was swinging against my belt, and, with eyes fixed on the willows before me, I was plunging at a reckless gallop down the side of the ravine. The horse was young and resented the punishment, but I had no desire to hold him, and the further he felt inclined to bolt the better it would please me. So we smashed through the thinner willows, and somehow reeled down an almost precipitous slope, reckless of the fact that there was a creek at the bottom, while the trail wound round towards a bridge, until the hoofs sank into soft ground, and we came floundering towards the tall growth by the water's edge. There the spurs went in again, and the beast, which knew nothing of jumping, rather rushed than launched itself at the creek. There was a splash and a flounder, a fountain of mire and water shot up, and green withes parted before me as we charged through the willows on the farther bank. The slope was soft and steep beneath the climbing birches, and by the time we were half-way up the beast had relinquished all desire to bolt; but my watch showed me that go he must, and it was without pity I drove him at the declivity. Meantime, a thud of hoofs followed us, and when, racing south across the levels, we had left the ravine two miles behind, Steel came up breathless.

"Can you do it, Harry?" he panted.

"I'm afraid not," I shouted. "Still, if I kill the horse under me, I'm going to try it. He's carrying a good many poor men's money."

A hurried calculation had proved conclusively that if the train were punctual I should miss it by more than an hour, and there was, of course, not another until the following day. Still, it was a long climb from Vancouver City up through the mountains of British Columbia to the Kicking Horse Pass in the Rockies, and there then remained a wide breadth of prairie for the mammoth locomotives to traverse. Sometimes when the load was heavy they lost an hour or two on the wild up-grade through the cañons. I was ignorant of legal procedure, but greatly feared that my non-appearance in the court would entail the forfeiture of the sureties, and, as the session was near an end, postpone the trial indefinitely. Therefore the train must be caught if it was in the power of horseflesh to accomplish it, and I settled myself to ride as for my life.

"Wouldn't the Port Arthur freight do?" shouted Steel.

"No," I answered. "It's the Atlantic express or nothing. You can pick those things up on your homeward journey."

Without checking the beast I managed to loosen the valise strapped before me, and hurled it down upon the prairie. It contained all I possessed in the shape of civilized apparel save what I rode in, and that was mired all over from the flounder through the creek; but the horse already carried weight enough. It was now blazing noon, and in the prairie summer the sun is fiercely hot. Here and there the bitter dust of alkali rolled across the waste, crusting our dripping faces and the coats of the lathered beasts. My eyelashes grew foul and heavy, blurring my vision, so that it was but dimly I saw the endless levels crawl up from the far horizon. A speck far down in the distance grew into the altitude of a garden plant, and, knowing what it must be, I pressed my heels home fiercely, waiting for what seemed hours until it should increase into a wind-dwarfed tree.

It passed. There was nothing but the dancing heat to break the great monotony of grass, while the gray streak where it cut the sky-line rolled steadily back in mockery of our efforts to reach it. Yet I was soaked in perspiration, and Steel was alkali white. There was a steady trickle into my eyes, and the taste of salt in my mouth, while the drumming of hoofs rose with a staccato thud-thud, like distant rifle fire, and the springy rush of the beasts beneath us showed how fast we were traveling. Steel shook his head as we raced up a rise which had tantalized me long, stirrup to stirrup and neck by neck, while the clots from the dripping bits drove past like flakes of wind-whirled snow.

"If you want to get there, Ormesby, this won't do," he said. "You'd break the heart of the toughest beast inside another hour."

"The need would justify a worse loss," I panted, snatching out my watch. "We have pulled up thirty minutes, but are horribly behind still. Men who can't afford to lose them have put up the stakes I am riding for."

Steel made a gesture of comprehension, but once more shook his head. "My beast's the better, and he's carrying a lighter weight, but he'll never last at the pace we're making. Save your own a little, and when he's dead beat I'll let up and change with you. I'll hang on in the meantime in case one of them comes to grief over a badger hole. It's your one chance if you're bent on getting through."

I would at that moment have gladly sold the rest of my life for the certainty of catching the train. To give my enemy no advantage was a great thing, and I felt that absence when my name was called would prejudice the most confiding against me. But that was, after all, a trifle compared with what I owed the men who had probably stripped themselves of necessities to help me, and I felt that if I failed them a shame which could never be dissipated would follow me. Nevertheless, Steel's advice was sound, and I tightened my grip on the bridle with a smothered imprecation. Then my heart grew heavier, for the horse needed no pulling, and responded with an ominous alacrity.

We were still leagues from the railroad, and the miles of grasses flitted towards us ever more slowly. The last clump of birches took half-an-hour to raise, and the willows which fled behind us had been five long minutes taking the shape of trees. My watch was clenched in one hand, and, while bluff and ravine crawled, its fingers raced round the dial with a horrible rapidity in testimony of the feebleness of flesh and blood when pitted against steel and steam. The clanging cars had swept clear of the foothills long ago, and the track ran straight and level across the prairie, a smooth empty road for the Accelerated to save time upon its race between the Pacific and the Laurentian waterway. When the prairie grew blurred before us, as it sometimes did, I could see instead the two huge locomotives veiled in dust and smoke thundering with a pitiless swiftness down the long converging rails, while the drumming of hoofs changed into the roar of wheels whose speed would brand me with dishonor. Yet we were doing all that man or beast could do, and at last a faint ray of hope and a new dismay came upon me. The difference in time had further fallen, but my horse was failing.

"Go on as you're going," shouted Steel, edging his whitened beast nearer. "I'm riding a stone lighter, and this beast has another hour's work left in him."

I went on, the horse growing more and more feeble and blundering in his stride, until at last, when it was a case of dismount or do murder, I dropped stiffly from the saddle. Steel was down in a second, and in another my jacket and vest were off, and I laid my foot to the stirrup in white shirt and trousers with a handkerchief knotted round my waist.

"You'll startle the folks in Empress, and you can't strip much more off," said Steel.

"I'd ride into the depot naked sooner than rob the boys," I said; and was mounted before my comrade could reopen his mouth. When he did so his "Good luck!" sounded already faint and far away.

Steel's horse had more life left in him—one could feel it in his stride; but now there was some hope of success I rode with more caution, sparing him up the low rises, and trying, so far as one might guess it, to keep within a very small margin of his uttermost strength. So we pressed on until all the prairie grew dim to me, and my only distinct sensation was the rush of the cool wind past. Then a flitting birch bluff roused me once more to watch, and minute by minute I strained my eyes for the first glimpse of the tall poles heralding the railroad track. At last a row of what looked like matches streaked the horizon, and grew in size until something that rose and fell with the heave of the prairie sea became visible beneath. Then as we topped one of its grassy waves, a cluster of distant cubes loomed up, and a glance at the watch's racing fingers warned me that I was already behind the time the train was due to reach the settlement. It might also have passed, and a new torture was added until, when in an agony of suspense I strained my eyes towards the west, a streak of whiteness crept out of the horizon.

The run of the Accelerated was at that time regarded as a national exploit, forming part, as it did, of a new link binding Japan and London—the East to the West; and I knew the conductor would hardly have waited for one of his own directors. The white streak grew rapidly larger; something sparkled beneath it, and there was flash of twinkling glass through the dust and steam. I fixed my eyes on the depot, and taxed every aching sinew in hand and heel, for the weakening beast must bring me there in time or die. A smoke cloud, with bright patches beneath it, rolled up to the depot when I was nearly half-a-mile away. The horse was reeling under me, the power had gone out of the leaden hands on switch and bridle, and—for the tension had produced a vertigo—my sight was almost gone.

Hearing, however, still remained, and shouts of encouragement reached me, while I could dimly see the depot close ahead, and shapeless figures apparently waving hats and arms. The clang of a big bell rang in my ears, the twin locomotives snorted, and I fell from the saddle, throwing the bridle aside, sprang towards the track, and clutched at the sliding rails of a car platform. I missed them, the car swaying giddily, so it seemed, rolled past, and I hurled myself bodily at the next platform. Somebody clutched my shoulder and dragged me up, and I fell with a heavy crash against the door of a vestibule.

"Just in time," said a man in uniform. "Say, are you doing this for a wager, or are some mad cow-chasers after you?"

XXII.

BAD TIDINGS.

The dust was rolling about the cars and the gaunt poles whirled by before I could recover breath to answer the astonished conductor. Then it was with a gasp I said: "Won't you get me a little water?"

The man vanished, and I sat still vacantly noticing how the prairie reeled behind me until the door slid open and he returned with a tin vessel and a group of curious passengers behind him. A piece of ice floated in the former, and a man held out a flask. "I guess it won't hurt him adulterated some," he said.

Never before had I tasted so delicious a draught. Hours of anxiety and effort under a blazing sun had parched and fouled my lips, and my throat was dry as unslaked lime. The tin vessel was empty when I handed it back, and the railroad official looked astonished as he turned it upside down for the spectators' information. "I guess a locomotive tank would hardly quench that thirst of yours," he said.

"Thanks. I'll get up. It was not for amusement I boarded your train as I did," I said, and the rest opened a passage for me into the long Colonist car. There was a mirror above the basin in the vestibule, and a glance into it explained their curiosity. The white shirt had burst in places; the grime of alkali had caked upon my face, leaving only paler circles about the eyes. Hardened mire crusted the rest of my apparel, and each movement made it evident to myself that portions of the epidermis had been abraded from me.

"It's not my business how passengers board these cars, so long as they're tolerably decent, and can pay their fare," observed the conductor. "Still, although we're not particular, we've got to dress you a little between us; and it mighn't be too much to ask what brought you here in such an outfit?"

It was evident that the others were waiting to ask the same question, and I answered diplomatically: "I have dollars enough to take me to Empress at Colonist fare, and was half-way to the depot to catch the cars on the old schedule before I discovered you had commenced on the accelerated service. Then I flung off every ounce of weight that might lose me the race."

"You must have had mighty important business," somebody said, and the door at the opposite end opened as I answered drily: "I certainly had."

"Hallo! Great Columbus! Is that you, Ormesby?" a voice which seemed familiar said; and, turning angrily, I saw a storekeeper I had dealt with staring in bewilderment at me.

"Ormesby!" the name was repeated by several passengers, and I read sudden suspicion in some of the faces, and sympathy in the rest, while one of them, with Western frankness, asked: "You're the Rancher Ormesby we've been reading about?"

"Yes," I answered, making a virtue of necessity. "I am on my way to surrender for trial, and redeem my bail. Now you can understand my hurry."

Several of the passengers nodded, and the dealer said: "It's tolerably plain you can't go like that; they're that proud of themselves in Empress they'd lock you up. So I'll try to find you something in my gripsack. Still, while I concluded you never done the thing, I'd like to hear you say straight off you know nothing about the burning of Gaspard's Trail."

"Then listen a second," I answered. "You have my word for it, that I know no more what caused the fire than you do. You will be able to read my defence in the papers, and I need not go into it here."

"That's enough for me," was the answer. "Now, gentlemen, if you have got anything you can lend my friend here in your valises, I'll guarantee they're either replaced or returned. Some of you know me, and here's my business card."

It may be curious, but I saw that most of those present, and they were all apparently from parts of the prairie, fully credited my statement, and one voiced the sentiments of the rest, when he said: "I'll do the best I can. If Mr. Ormesby had played the fire-bug he wouldn't be so mighty anxious to get back to court again."

The position was humiliating; but no choice was left me. I must either accept the willing offers or enter Empress half-naked, and accordingly made a hasty selection among the garments thrust upon me. Twenty minutes spent in the lavatory with the colored porter's assistance produced a comforting change, and when I returned to the car, one of the most generous lenders surveyed me with pride as well as approval.

"You do us credit, Rancher, and you needn't worry about the thanks. We've no use for them," he said. "Hope you'll get off; but if you are sent up for burning that place down, I'll be proud of having helped to outfit a famous man."

Perhaps my face was ludicrous with its mingled expressions of gratitude and disgust at this naive announcement, for a general laugh went up which I finally joined in, and that hoarse merriment gave me the freedom of the Colonist car. Rude burlesque is interspersed amidst many a tragedy, and I had seen much worse situations saved by the grace of even coarse humor. Thereafter no personal questions were asked and most of my fellow travelers treated me with a delicacy of consideration which is much less uncommon than one might suppose among the plain, hard-handed men who wrest a living out of the prairie.

Night had closed in some time earlier when I strolled out across the platform of the car and leaned upon the rails of the first-class before it. Tired physically as I was, the nervous restlessness which followed the mental strain would, I think, have held me wakeful, even if there had been anything more than a bare shelf of polished maple, which finds out every aching bone, to sleep upon. This, however, was not the case, for those who travel Colonist must bring their own bedding, or do without it. It was a glorious summer night, still and soft, and effulgent with the radiance of the full moon which hung low above the prairie, while the sensation of swift travel is bracing to many temperaments.

There was no doubt the Accelerated was pulling up lost time, and the lurching, clanking, pounding, roar of flying wheels, and panting of mammoth engines both soothed and exhilarated me. They were in one sense prosiac and commonplace sounds, but—so that night it seemed to me—in another a testimony to man's dominion over not only plant and beast upon the face of the earth, but also the primeval forces which move the universe. Further, the diapason of the great drivers and Titanic snorting, rising and falling rhythmically amid the pulsating din, broke through the prairie's silence as it were a triumphant hymn of struggle and effort, and toil all-conquering, as dropping the leagues behind it the long train roared on. I knew something of the cost, paid in the sweat of tremendous effort, and part in blood and agony, of the smooth road across the continent the great machines raced along.

Perhaps I was overstrung, and accordingly fanciful; but I gathered fresh courage, which was, indeed, badly needed, and had grown partly reassured and tranquil, when the door creaked behind me, and there was a light step on the platform. Then, turning suddenly, I found myself within a foot of Lucille Haldane's side. She was bare-headed. The moon shone on her face which, as I had dreamt of it, looked at once ethereal and very human under the silvery light. This, at least, was not a fancy born of overtaxed nerves, for while given to heartsome merriment, daring, and occasionally imperious, there was a large share of the spiritual in the character of the girl. Shrewd, she certainly was, yet wholly fresh and innocent, and at times I had seen depths of pity and sympathy which it seemed were not wholly earthly in her eyes. When one can name and number all the mysterious forces which rule the heart or brain of any man, it may be possible to tell why, when her sister's idealized image was ever before me, I would have done more for Lucille Haldane than any living woman.

We were both of us a little surprised at the encounter, and I fancied I had seen a momentary shrinking from me in the eyes of the girl. This at once furnished cause for wonder, and hurt me. She had shown no shrinking at our last meeting.

"I did not expect to meet you when I came out for the sake of coolness. Are you going east?" I said.

Lucille Haldane was usually frank in speech, but she now appeared perplexed by, and to almost resent, the question. "Yes. I have some business which cannot be neglected in that direction," she said.

"Is Miss Haldane or your father on board the train?" I asked, and Lucille seemed to hesitate before she answered:

"No. My father is in Winnipeg, and Beatrice has gone to Montreal; but Mrs. Hansen, our housekeeper, is here with me."

I was partly, but not altogether, relieved by this information. It was no doubt foolish, but I had been at first horribly afraid that the whole of my friends from Bonaventure had seen in what manner I boarded the train. I would also have given a good deal to discover whether Lucille had witnessed the spectacle, but did not quite see how to acquire the knowledge.

"It must be important business which takes you east alone," I said idly—to gain time in which to frame a more leading question; but the words had a somewhat startling effect. A trace of indignation or confusion became visible in the girl's face as she answered: "I have already told you it it is business which cannot be neglected; and if you desire any further information I fear I cannot give it you. Now, suppose we reverse the positions. What has made you so unusually inquisitive to-night, Mr. Ormesby?"

The positions were reversed with a vengeance, somewhat to my disgust. I had neither right nor desire to pry into Lucille Haldane's affairs, and yet felt feverishly anxious to discover how much or how little she had seen at the depot. It was no use to reason with myself that this was of no importance, for the fact remained.

"I must apologize if I seemed so," I said. "It would have been impertinence; but I will make a bargain with you. If you will tell me whether you boarded the cars immediately the train came in, and what seat you took, I will tell you the cause of it."

This struck me as a clever manœuvre, for if, as I hoped, she had seen nothing, the story would certainly reach Bonaventure, and it seemed much better that she should hear it first, and carefully toned down, from my own lips. Lucille Haldane's face cleared instantaneously, and there was a note of relief in her laugh.

"Must you always make a bargain? You remember the last"; but here she broke off suddenly and favored me with a wholly sympathetic glance. "I did not mean to recall that unfortunate night. You should come to the point always, for you are not brilliant in diplomacy, and shall have without a price the information you so evidently desire. I was standing on the car platform when you rode up to the station."

We are only mortal, and I fear I ground one heel, perhaps audibly, but certainly viciously, into the boards beneath me. Still, I am certain that my lips did not open. Nevertheless, I was puzzled by the sparkle in Lucille Haldane's eyes which the radiant moonlight emphasized. There was more than mischief in it; but what the more consisted of I could not tell. "Have you forgotten the virtues of civilized restraint?" she asked demurely.

I could see no cause for these swift changes, which would probably have bewildered any ordinary man, and made answer: "It may be so; but on this occasion, at least, I said nothing."

Lucille Haldane laughed, and laid her hand lightly on my arm as the cars jolted. "Then you certainly looked it; but I am not blaming you. I saw you ride into the depot, and hardly grasp the reason for so much modesty. I do not know what delayed you, but I know you were trying to redeem the trust your neighbors placed in you."

I was apparently a prey to all disordered fancies that night, for it seemed a desecration that the little white hand should even bear the touch of another man's jacket, and I lifted it gently into my own hard palm. Also, I think I came desperately near stooping and touching it with my lips. Be that as it may, in another second the opportunity was lacking, for Lucille grasped the rails with it some distance apart from me, and leaned out over them to watch the sliding prairie, her light dress streaming about her in the whistling draught.

"The cars were very stuffy, and I am glad I came out. It is a perfectly glorious night," she said.

The remark seemed very disconnected, but she was right. The prairie was there dead-level, a vast, rippling silver sea overhung by a spangled vault of softest indigo. In spite of the rattling blast and puffs of whirled-up dust the lash of cool wind was grateful, and the rush of the clanking cars stirred one's blood. Still, in contrast to their bulk and speed, the slight figure in the fluttering white dress seemed very frail and insecure as it leaned forth from the rails, and I set my teeth when, with a sudden swing and a giddy slanting we roared across a curving bridge. Before the dark creek whirled behind us I had flung my arm partly round the girl's waist and clenched the rails in front of her.

"I am quite safe," she said calmly, after a curious glance at me. "You look positively startled."

"I was so," I answered, speaking no more than the truth, for the fright had turned me cold; and she once more looked down at the whirling prairie.

"That was very unreasonable. You are not responsible for me."

Perhaps the fright had rendered me temporarily light-headed, for I answered, on impulse: "No. On the other hand, you are responsible for me."

"I?" the girl said quietly, with a demureness which was not all mockery. "How could that be? Such a responsibility would be too onerous for me."

"Why it should be I cannot tell you; but it is the truth," I said. "Twice, when a crisis had to be faced, it was your opinions which turned the scale for me; and I think that, growing hopeless, I should have allowed Lane to rob me and gone elsewhere in search of better fortune had it not been for the courage you infused into me. Once or twice also you pointed the way out of a difficulty, and the clearness of your views was almost startling. The most curious thing is that you are so much younger than me."

I had spoken no more than the truth, and was conscious of a passing annoyance when Lucille Haldane laughed: "There is no overcoming masculine vanity; and I once heard my father say you were in some respects very young for your age," she said. "I am afraid it was presumption, but don't mind admitting I am glad if any chance word of mine nerved you to continue your resistance." Her voice changed a little as she added: "Of course, that is because your enemy's work is evil, and I think you will triumph yet."

Neither of us spoke again for a time, and I remember reflecting that whoever won Lucille Haldane would have a helpmate to be proud of in this world, and perhaps, by virtue of what she could teach him, follow into the next. I could think so the more dispassionately because, now, both she and her sister were far above me, though, knowing my own kind, I wondered where either could find any man worthy.

So the minutes slipped by while the great express raced on, and blue heavens and silver prairie unrolled themselves before us in an apparently unending panorama. There had been times when I considered such a prospect dreary enough, but it appeared surcharged with a strange glamor that moonlit night.

"Will Miss Haldane return to Bonaventure?" I asked, at length.

"I hardly think so," said the girl. "We have very different tastes, you know; and as father will not keep more than one of us with him, we can both gratify them. Beatrice will leave for England soon, and in all probability will not visit Bonaventure again."

She looked at me with a strange expression as she spoke, and when her meaning dawned upon me, I was conscious of a heavy shock. I had braced myself to face the inevitable already, but the knowledge was painful nevertheless, and my voice was not quite steady when I said: "You imply that Miss Haldane is to be married shortly?"

"It is not an impossible contingency."

Lucille spoke gravely, and I wondered whether she had guessed the full significance of the intimation. Perhaps my face had grown a little harder, or the tightening of my fingers on the rail betrayed me, for she looked up very sympathetically. "I thought it would be better that you should know."

There was such kindness stamped upon her face that my heart went out to her; and it was almost huskily I said: "I thank you. You have keen perceptions."

Lucille smiled gravely. "One could see that you thought much of Beatrice—and I was sorry that it should be so."

Her tone seemed to challenge further speech, and presently I found words again: "It was an impossible dream, almost from the beginning; but I awakened to the reality long ago. Still, nothing can rob me of the satisfaction of having known your sister and you, and your influence has been good for me. One can at least cherish the memory, and even a wholly impossible fancy has its benefits."

The girl colored, and said quietly: "It is not our fault that you overrate us, and one finds the standard others set up for us irksome. And yet you cannot be easily influenced, from what I know."

"Heaven knows how weak and unstable I have been at times, but I learned much that was good for me at Bonaventure, and should, whatever happens, desire to keep your good opinion," I said.

"I think you will always do that," said the girl, moving towards the door. "It is growing late, but before I go I want to ask you to go to your trial to-morrow with a good courage, and not to be astonished at anything you hear and see. If you are, you must try to remember that we Canadians actually are, as our orators tell us, a free people, and that the prairie farmers do not monopolize all our love of justice."

She brushed lightly past me, and the prairie grew dim and desolate as the door clicked to. I had long dreaded the news just given me, but such expectations do not greatly lessen one's sense of loss. Still, it may have been that my senses were too dulled to feel the worst pain, and I sat down on the top step of the platform with my arm through the railing in a state of utter weariness and dejection, which mercifully acted as an anæsthetic. How long I watched the moonlit waste sweep past the humming wheels I do not know; but tired nature must have had her way, for it was early morning when a brakeman fell over me, and by the time the resultant altercation was concluded, the clustered roofs of Empress rose out of the prairie.

XXIII.

LIBERTY.

Sleep had brought me a brief forgetfulness, but the awakening was not pleasant when I painfully straightened my limbs on the jolting platform, while the twin whistles shrieked ahead. Every joint ached from the previous day's exertions, my borrowed garments were clammy with dew, and I shivered in the cold draught that swept past the slowing cars. The sun had not cleared the grayness which veiled the east, and, frowned down upon by huge elevators which rose higher and higher against a lowering sky, the straggling town loomed up depressingly out of the surrounding desolation. The pace grew slower, a thicket of willows choked with empty cans and garbage slid by, then the rails of the stockyards closed in on either hand, and we jolted over the switches into the station, which was built, as usual, not in, but facing, the prairie town.

There was no sign of life in its ill-paved streets, down which the dust wisps danced; bare squares of wooden buildings, devoid of all ornamentation, save for glaring advertisements which emphasized their ugliness, walled them in, and the whole place seemed stamped with the dreariness which characterizes most prarie towns when seen by anybody not in the best of spirits early on a gloomy morning. My fellow passengers were apparently asleep, but I was the better pleased, having no desire for speech, and dropped from the platform as soon as the locomotives stopped. Hurrying out of the station I did not turn round until a row of empty farm wagons hid the track, which action was not without results.

One hotel door stood open, but knowing that its tariff was not in accordance with my finances, I passed it by and patroled the empty streets until the others, or a dry goods store, should make ready for business. One of the latter did so first, and when I entered a mirror showed that the decision was not unnecessary. The borrowed jacket was far too small, the vest as much too large, while somebody's collar cut chokingly into my sunburnt neck. Still, the prices the sleepy clerk mentioned were prohibitive, and after wasting a little time in somewhat pointed argument—of which he had the best—I strode out of the store, struggling with an inclination to assault him. Western storekeepers are seldom characterized by superfluous civility, and there are disadvantages attached to a life in a country so free that, according to one of its sayings, any man who cannot purchase boots may always walk up and down it barefooted.

"I don't know what the outfit you've got on cost you, and shouldn't wonder, by the way it fits, if you got it cheap," he said. "We don't turn out our customers like scarecrows, any way, and if you'd had the dollars would have tried to make a decent show of you."

I was nevertheless able, after almost emptying my purse, to at least replace the vest and jacket at a rival establishment, whose proprietor promised to forward the borrowed articles to their legitimate owners. I afterwards discovered that they never received them.

"You look smart as a city drummer, the top half of you, but it makes the rest look kind of mean. You want to live up to that coat," he said, after a critical survey.

"I can't do it at the price, unless you will take your chances of getting paid when the stock go east," I said; and the dealer shook his head sorrowfully.

"We don't trade that way with strangers, and I don't know you."

I was in a reckless mood, and some puerile impulse prompted me to astonish him. "My name is Henry Ormesby!"

The man positively gasped, and then, with Western keenness prepared to profit by the opportunity. "I'll fit you out all for nothing if you'll walk round to the photographer's and give me your picture with a notice to stick in the window that you think my things the best in town," he said. "It would be worth dollars every time the prairie boys come in, and I don't mind throwing a few of them into the bargain."

This was exasperating, but I could not restrain a mirthless laugh; and, leaving the enterprising dealer astonished that any man should refuse such an offer, hurried out of the store; but by the time the breakfast hour arrived all trace of even sardonic humor had left me. It was with difficulty I had raised sufficient ready money for the journey, and there now remained but two or three silver coins in my pocket, while, remembering that the dealer had been justified in pointing out the desirability of a complete renovation, I reflected gloomily that it would be useless, because, in all probability, the nation would shortly feed and clothe me. I also remembered how I had seen men with heavy chains upon their ankles road-making before the public gaze in a British Columbian town.

Meantime, I was very hungry, and presently sat down to a simple breakfast in a crowded room. While waiting a few minutes my eyes fell upon a commercial article in a newspaper, which, while noting a revival of trade, deplored the probable abandonment of much needed railroad extension. The writer appeared well posted, and mentioned the road we hoped so much from as one of the works which would not be undertaken. I laid down the journal with a sigh, and noticed that the men about me were discussing the coming trial.

"I expect they'll send Ormesby up," said one man, between his rapid gulps. "Don't know if he done it, but he threatened the other fellow, and said he'd see him roasted before he helped; while that match-box would fix most anybody up."

"Well, I don't know," observed a neighbor. "The match-box looks bad; but I guess if I'd been burning a place up I shouldn't have forgotten it. Still, it might be fatal unless he could disown it. As to the other thing, I don't count much on what he said. A real fire-bug would have kept his mouth shut and helped all he was worth instead of saying anything."

"I'm offering five to one he goes up. Any takers in dollars?" said the first speaker; and it was significant that, although most Westerners are keen at a bet, nobody offered.

"I'd do it for less, 'cept for the match-box," said one.

I managed to finish my breakfast, feeling thankfut that—because (so their appearance suggested) those who sat at meat had driven in from the prairie to enjoy the spectacle—none of them recognized me. The odds, in their opinion, were more than five to one against me, and I agreed with them. Slipping out I found Dixon, and reported my presence to the police, while, after what seemed an endless waiting at the court, it was early afternoon when Dixon said to me: "They'll be ready in five minutes, and I want you to keep a tight rein on your temper, Ormesby. I can do all the fancy talking that is necessary. You can keep your heart up, too. There are going to be surprises for everyone to-day."

I was called in a few minutes, and if the court had been thronged on previous occasions it was packed to suffocation now. It was a bare, ugly, wood-built room, even dirtier than it was dingy. Neither is there anything impressive, save, perhaps, to the culprit, about the administration of Western justice, and I was thankful for a lethargy which helped me to bear the suspense with outward indifference. Nothing striking marked the first part of the proceedings, and I sat listening to the drawl of voices like one in a dream. Some of the spectators yawned, and some fidgeted, until there was a sudden stir of interest as the name "Thomas Wilkins" rang through the court.

"I guess that's the prosecution's trump ace," said a man beneath me.

I became suddenly intent as this witness took his stand. He was of the usual type of Canadian-born farm hand, bronzed and wiry, but not heavily built, and hazarded what I fancied was a meaning glance at me. I could not understand it, for he seemed at once ashamed and exultant.

"I was hired by Rancher Niven to help him at Gaspard's Trail, and remember the night of the fire well. Guess anybody who'd been trod on by a horse and left with broken bones to roast would," he said; and proceeded to confirm Niven's testimony. This was nothing new, and the interest slackened, but revived again when the witness approached the essential part of his story, and I could hear my own heart thumping more plainly than the slow drawling voice.

"I was round at the wreck of the homestead some time after the fire. Don't know the date, but Niven made a note of it. Kind of precise man he was. The place wasn't all burnt to the ground, and Niven he crawls in under some fallen logs into what had been the kitchen. The door opened right on to the prairie, and anybody could slip in if they wanted to. Niven grabbed at something on the floor. 'Come along and take a look at this,' says he; and I saw it was a silver match-box he held up. There was 'H. Ormesby' not quite worn off it. Niven he prospects some more, and finds a flattened coal-oil tin. Yes, sir; those you are holding up are the very things. 'We don't use that brand of oil, and buy ours in bigger cans,' says he."

I could see by the spectators' faces it was damaging testimony, and Dixon's serene appearance was incomprehensible, while, for the benefit of those ignorant of Western customs, it may be explained that kerosene is sold in large square tins for the settler's convenience in several parts of the Dominion.

"I went over to the store with Niven next day," continued the witness. "The man who kept it allowed that Rancher Ormesby was about the only man he sold that brand in small cans to."

There were signs of subdued sensation, and Wilkins recommenced: "We gave them both to Sergeant Mackay, and by-and-by I was summoned to come here and testify. I came right along; then it struck me it was mean to help in sending up the man who'd saved my life for me. So I just lit out and hid myself until the police trailed me."

It was news to hear that Lane had no hand in the witness's disappearance; and again he flashed an apparently wholly unwarranted reassuring glance in my direction. Then, while I wondered hopelessly whether Dixon could shake his testimony, the latter stood up.

"I purpose to ask Thomas Wilkins a few questions later, and will not trouble him about the match-box, being perfectly satisfied as to the accuracy of the facts he states," he said.

I could see the spectators stare at him in surprise, and, wondering if he had lost his senses, settled myself to listen as the storekeeper deposed to selling me oil of the description mentioned, adding reluctantly that very few others took the same size of can. This, and a lengthy speech, closed the prosecutor's case, and it seemed, when he had finished, that nothing short of a miracle could save me. The audience was also evidently of the same opinion.

Dixon commenced feebly by submitting evidence as to my uprightness of character, which his opponent allowed to pass unchallenged with a somewhat contemptuous indifference. Then he said: "It will be remembered that in this evidence Sergeant Mackay deposed that the witness Niven told him the burning homestead was not insured, and I will call the Western agent of a famous fire office."

The evidence of the gentleman in question was brief and to the point. "I have heard the statement that Gaspard's Trail was not insured, and can't understand it. The witness Niven took out a policy three months before the fire, and sent in his claim straight off to me. The company declined to meet it until this case was settled. Am I quite certain, or can I offer any explanation? Well, here's our premium receipt foil and record of the policy. Can't suggest any explanation, except that somebody is lying."

This was received with some sensation, and Dixon smiled at me as if there was more in store. "You will observe that the witness Niven cannot be considered a very truthful person. I will recall Thomas Wilkins," he said.

Wilkins had lost his shame-facedness when he reappeared. "I said the prisoner saved my life, and meant just that," he said, answering a question. "It was he who took me out of the fire, and I had sense enough to see he was leading the boys who saved all Niven's horses. It's my opinion—you don't want opinions? Well, I'll try to pitch in the solid facts."

"Your master went east for a few days before the fire and brought a case of groceries home with him," said Dixon. "Will you tell us if you opened that case?"

"I did," was the answer. "He sent me in to the depot for it with the check. Said our storekeeper was a robber, and he'd saved dollars by buying down east. It was a blame heavy case, so I started to open it in the wagon, and had just pulled the top off when Niven came along."

"Did you see anything except groceries in it?" asked Dixon; and there was a stirring in the court when Wilkins answered "I did. I had lit on to the top of three coal-oil tins when the boss came in."

"Did he look pleased at your diligence?"

"No, sir. He looked real mad. 'If you'll do what you're asked to without mixing up my private things it will be good enough for me. Get your horses fixed right now,' he said."

"You are sure about the oil tins? Were they large or small—and did you ever see them or the groceries again?"

"Dead sure," was the answer. "I stowed the groceries in the kitchen, but never saw the oil. It was a smaller size than we used, any way. Didn't think much about it until I read a paper about this trial not long ago. Begin to think a good deal now."

I drew in a deep breath, and the movements of expectant listeners grew more audible when, reminded that his impressions were not asked for, Wilkins stepped down. Hope was beginning to dawn, for I could see that Dixon was on the trail of a conspiracy. Everybody seemed eager, the prosecutor as much so as the rest, and there was a deep silence when Dixon folded up the paper he had been making notes upon.

"My next witness is Miss Lucille Haldane, of Bonaventure," he said.

There was a low murmur, every head was turned in the same direction, and I grew hot with shame and indignation when Haldane's youngest daughter walked into the witness stand. It seemed to me a desecration that she should be dragged forward into an atmosphere of crime as part of the spectacle before a sea of curious faces, and I had never felt the enforced restraint so horribly oppressive as when I read admiration in some of them. Had it been possible to wither up Dixon with a glance it is hardly likely that he would ever have handled a case again. The girl looked very young and pretty as, with a patch of almost hectic color in either cheek, and a brightness in her eyes, she took her place. She wore no veil, and held herself proudly as, without sign of weakness, she looked down upon the assembly. While she did so there was, without articulate sound, something that suggested wonder and approval in the universal movement, and I heard a man beneath me say: "She's a daisy. Now we're coming right into the business end of the play."

"You know the prisoner Ormesby?" asked Dixon; and though her voice was low, its clear distinctness seemed to permeate the building as she answered: "I do. He is a friend of my father's, and visited us at Bonaventure occasionally."

"Did you ever see a silver match-box in his possession, and, if so, could you describe it?"

"I did, on several occasions. He wore it hooked on to his watch chain, and once handed it to me to light a lamp with. It had an oak-leaf engraving with a partly obliterated inscription—'From —— to H. Ormesby.' "

"I think that is an accurate description," said Dixon; and when the judge, who held up a little silver object and passed it on to the jury, signified assent, I glanced in savage bewilderment at the speaker. It had appeared shamefully cruel to hail that delicate girl into a crowded court before, now it also appeared sheer madness. She never once glanced in my direction, but stood with head erect, one hand resting on the rails, where the pitiless sunlight beat full upon her, with eyes fixed only on the judge; but in spite of her courage I could see that her lips trembled, while the little gloved fingers tightened spasmodically on the rails. Then I hung my head for very shame that I had been the unwitting cause of such an ordeal, feeling that I would prefer to suffer ten convictions rather than that she should become a subject for discussion in every saloon, and the free commentary of the Western press, even if she could have saved me.

"When did you last see the match-box?" asked Dixon.

"On the morning of the Wednesday in the third week after the fire. I am sure of the day, because the visit of some friends from Montreal impressed it upon my memory. Henry Ormesby had stayed all night at Bonaventure and left early in the morning. A maid brought me the match-box, which she had found on the bureau, with one or two articles of clothing; and as he did not return I told her to slip the match-box inside the packet and forward them. I forgot the incident until the trial recalled it."

As Lucille ceased it flashed upon me that I had wondered how the match-box had made its way into a pocket in which I never carried it. Then I was borne down by a great wave of gratitude to the girl whom, it seemed, had saved me. She was rigorously cross-examined, and, while I do not know if the prosecutor exceeded due limits in his efforts to shake her evidence, I grew murderously inclined towards him as I noticed how his victim's color came and went, and the effort it cost her not to shrink under the questions. But her courage rose with the emergency, and when the indignation crept into her eyes there was several times subdued applause as her answer to some innuendo carried a rebuke with it.

At last the approbation was no more subdued, but swelled into a hoarse murmur, which filled all the court when she drew herself up at the question: "And it was because you were a firm friend of the prisoner's you recollected all this so opportunely, and, in spite of the diffidence any lady in your position would feel, volunteered to give evidence?"

The damask patch had spread to Lucille Haldane's forehead, but instead of being downcast her eyes were filled with light. "No," she said; and the vibration in her voice had a steely ring. "It was because I am a Canadian, and accordingly desired to see justice done to an innocent man. Can you consider such a desire either uncommon or surprising?"

A full minute had elapsed before the case proceeded, during which an excitable juryman rose and seemed on the point of haranguing the assembly until a comrade dragged him down. Then laughter broke through the murmurs as he gesticulated wildly amid shouts of "Order."

A Scandinavian domestic quaintly corroborated her mistress's statement, and there was no doubt that the scale was turned; but Dixon did not leave his work half-completed, and the next witness confirmed this evidence.

"I keep the Railroad Hotel. It's not a saloon, but a hotel, with a big H," he said. "Know Harry Ormesby well. Saw him about three weeks after the fire lighting a cigar I gave him from a silver matchbox. Oh, yes, I'm quite sure about the box; had several times seen the thing before. Was pretty busy when the boys started smoking round the stove after supper, and forgot to pick up something bright beneath Ormesby's chair. Was going to tell him he'd dropped his box, when somebody called me. The boys cleared out when the cars came in, and I saw Niven among them. Knew him as a customer—don't want to as a friend. Got too much of the coyote about him. My Chinaman was turning out the lights when I saw somebody slip back quietly. He grabbed at something by the chair, and went out by the other door. There was only a light in the passage left, and I didn't quite recognize him. Could swear it wasn't Ormesby, and think he was more like Niven. Asked Niven about it afterwards, and he said it wasn't him; didn't see Ormesby, but wired his lawyer when I'd read the papers. Don't believe Ormesby had enough malice in him to burn a henhouse up."

There were further signs of sensation, and Sergeant Mackay was called again. He had ridden over to Gaspard's Trail the day following the fire, and decided to clear out the refuse dump, he said. Then the whole audience grinned, when, being asked why he did so, he glanced at the jury as if for sympathy, answering: "I was thinking I might find something inside it. A man must do his duty, but it was a sairly distressful operation." He found two unopened coal-oil tins resembling the flattened one, and was certain by the appearance of the dump they had been placed there some time before the fire.

There was no further evidence. Dixon said very little, but that little told. The jury had scarcely retired before one of them reappeared, and, with a rush of blood to my forehead and a singing in my ears, I caught the words—"Not guilty!"

Then, when the judge, and even the prosecuting counsel, said he fully concurred, the murmurs swelled until they filled the court again; and presently I was standing outside, a free man, in the center of an excited crowd, for Western citizens are desperately fond of any sensation. How many cigars and offers of liquid refreshments were thrust upon me I do not remember, but they were overwhelmingly numerous, and I was grateful when Dixon came to the rescue.

"Mr. Ormesby is much obliged to you, gentlemen, but it's quiet he wants just now," he said; while we had hardly reached the leading hotel where Dixon led me, than there was a clamor in the direction of the court, and I looked at him inquiringly.

"I expect they've issued a warrant for Niven on a charge of conspiracy or arson, and the boys have heard of it," he said. "However, I have had sufficient professional occupation for to-day, and we're going to get supper and afterwards enjoy ourselves as we can."

I had, nevertheless, determined to thank my benefactress first, and, ignoring Dixon's advice, sent up my name. I was informed that Miss Haldane would receive nobody, and the lawyer smiled drily when I returned crestfallen. "I don't think you need feel either hurt or surprised," he said.

The inhabitants of the prairie towns differ from the taciturn plainsmen in being vociferously enthusiastic and mercurial, and to my disgust the citizens came in groups to interview me, while one, who shoved his way into our quarters by main force, said the rest would take it kindly if I made a speech to them.

"You can tell them I feel honored, but nobody can charge me with ever having done such a thing in my life," I said; and the representatives of the populace retired, to find another outlet for their energies, as we presently discovered.

"I owe my escape solely to a lady's courage and your skill, Dixon; but why didn't you try to implicate Lane?" I said; and the lawyer laughed.

"Any reasonable man ought to be satisfied with the verdict and demonstration. It would have been difficult, if not useless, while I fancy that if Lane is allowed a little more rope his time will shortly come," he said. "Hallo! Here are more enthusiastic citizens desirous of interviewing you."

"Keep them out, for heaven's sake," I said; but before Dixon could secure the door Sergeant Mackay strode in.

"I have come to congratulate ye. It will be a lesson til ye, Ormesby," he announced.

I did not see the hand he held out. "I'm in no mood for sermons, and can't appreciate your recent actions as they perhaps deserve," I said; and the sergeant's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"It should not be that difficult; and ye have the consolation that ye served the State," he said. "It was in the interest of justice we—well—we made use of ye to stalk the other man."

"There's no use pretending I'm grateful," I commenced; but Dixon broke into a boisterous laugh, and the sergeant's face grew so humorous that my own relaxed and we made friends again. The reunion had not long been consummated when a rattle of wheels, followed by the tramp of many feet and the wheezy strain of a cornet, rose from below, and, striding to the window, I said with dismay: "Lock the door. They're coming with a band and torches now."

"I'm thinking ye need not," said Mackay drily. "It's a farewell to Miss Haldane they're giving."

We gathered at the open window, looking down upon a striking spectacle. A vehicle stood waiting, and behind it, lighted by the glow of kerosene torches, a mass of faces filled the street. The heads were uncovered almost simultaneously, and Lucille Haldane appeared upon the hotel steps with her attendants behind her. At first she shrank back a little from the gaze of the admiring crowd, to whom her spirit and beauty had doubtless appealed; but when one of them urged something very respectfully, with his hat in his hand, she moved forward a pace and stood very erect, a slight but queenly figure, looking down upon them.

"I am honored, gentlemen," she said falteringly, though her voice gained strength. "It was merely a duty I did, but I am gratified that it pleased you, just because it shows that we are all of us proud of our country and eager, for its credit, to crush oppression and see justice done to the down-trodden."

The street rang with the cheer that followed, and when Dixon seized his hat the action was infectious. Next minute we were moving forward amid the ranks of the enthusiastic crowd behind the vehicle, which jolted slowly towards the depot; and I discovered later that the uncomfortable sensation at the back of my neck was caused by the hot oil from a torch, which dripped upon it. In the meantime I noticed nothing but the sea of faces, tramp of feet, and final burst of cheering at the depot, in which Mackay, holding aloft his forage cap, joined vociferously.

"It's only fit and proper. She's as good and brave as she's bonny," he said.

XXIV.

A SECRET TRIBUNAL.

Some little time had elapsed since my acquittal, when, one pleasant summer morning, I rode out from the railroad settlement bound for Bonaventure. The air was soft and balmy, the sunshine brilliant, and the praririe sod, which, by that time, had in most years grown parched and dry, formed a springy green carpet beneath the horse's feet. There had but once before been such a season within my memory, and my spirits were almost as buoyant as the wallet in my pocket was heavy. The lean years had passed and left us, perhaps a little more grave in face and quiet in speech, to look forward to a brightening future, while the receipts I had brought back from the nearest town meant freedom at least.

I was also unwearied in body, for the roll of paper money in the wallet had made a vast difference to me, and instead of riding all night after a long railroad journey, I had slept and breakfasted well at the wooden hotel. Indeed, I almost wondered if I was the same man who had previously ridden that way in a state of sullen desperation, spurred on by hatred and dogged obstinacy instead of hope. Now I was, however, rather thankful than jubilant, for my satisfaction was tempered by a perhaps unusual humility. Steel, Thorn and I had, in our own blundering fashion, made the best fight we could, but it was the generosity of others and the winds of heaven which had brought us the victory.

Distance counts for little in these days, when the steel track and modern cargo steamer between them girdle the face of the globe; and the loss of others had been our gain. There had been scarcity in Argentina, and Australian grass was shriveling for want of rain. Famine had smitten India, and the great cattle barons beyond our frontier had been over-busily engaged, attempting the extermination of the smaller settlers, to attend their legitimate business, so buyers in Europe were looking to Canada for wheat and cattle. Our own beasts had flourished, and before the usual season we had driven every salable head in to the railroad, riding in force behind them. That drive and the events which followed are worth remembering.

I sold the cattle in Winnipeg for excellent prices, and deducting my own share of the proceeds, took the first train westwards to visit Lane, and paid him down three-fourths of the balance of the loan. Having bought wisdom dearly, I took a lawyer with me. The former showed neither surprise nor chagrin, though he must have felt them both, and I could almost admire the way he bore defeat. He was less a man than a money-machine, and the more to be dreaded for his absence of passion. Rage was apparently as unknown to him as pity, and, though he knew he had lost Crane Valley, and with it the completion of a well-laid scheme, he actually pushed a cigar-box towards me as he signed the receipt. I drew a deep breath of relief as I passed the papers to the lawyer, for the harvest would more than cover what remained of the debt, and then laid down certain sums on behalf of others. Lane smiled almost affably as he tossed the quittances upon the table.

"They're all in order, Rancher. A capable man don't need to use second-rate trickery, and I'm open to allow that the bull-frog was hard to squash," he said.

I pocketed the documents and went out in silence. Speech would have been useless, because the man had no sensibilities that could be wounded; but the interview struck me as a grotesquely commonplace termination of a struggle which had cost me months of misery. Indeed, I found it hard to convince myself that what had happened was real, and the heavy burden flung off at last. Being by no means a mere passionless money-making machine, I had, nevertheless, not finished with Lane.

It was evening next day when I reached Bonaventure, and was shown into the presence of its owner, who had lately returned there from the east. He looked haggard, and did not rise out of the chair he lounged in, though his voice was cordial. "You have been successful, Ormesby. I can see it by your face," he said.

"I have, sir," I answered. "More so than I dared to hope, and fancy you will be astonished when you count these bills. The Bonaventure draft played a leading part in my release, and now I find it difficult to realize that the luck has changed at last."

It was not quite dark outside, but the curtains were drawn, and Haldane sat beside a table littered with papers under a silver reading-lamp. His face looked curiously ascetic and thin, but the smile in his keen eyes was genial. Boone sat opposite him smoking, and nodded good-humoredly to me.

"You will soon get used to prosperity, and there is no occasion for gratitude," he said, tossing the roll of paper money across the table, but taking up the account I laid beside it. "I notice that you have earned me a profit of 20 per cent. You have tolerable business talents in your own direction, Ormesby, and I shall expect your good counsel in the practical management of Bonaventure which I have undertaken."

"The management of Bonaventure?" I said, and Haldane's forehead grew wrinkled as he nodded.

"Exactly. The verdict has been given. No more exciting corners or supposititious heaping up of unearned increment for me. I am sentenced by the specialists to a dormant life and open-air exercise, and have accordingly chosen the rearing of cattle upon the salubrious prairie."

I guessed what that sentence meant to a man of his energies; but he had accepted it gracefully, and I was almost startled when he said: "Do you know that I envied you, Ormesby, even when things looked worst for you?"

I could only murmur a few not over appropriate words of sympathy, though I fancy that had Haldane been under the same grip he might have envied me less.

"It takes time to grow used to idleness, which is why I sent for you to-night," he said, with a swift resumption of his usual tone. "I purpose to teach Lane that he is not altogether so omnipotent as he believes himself—partly by way of amusement and to forward certain views of my own, and partly because my younger daughter insists that he is a menace to every honest man upon the prairie. Boone appears inclined to agree with her."

"I might even go a little further, sir," said Boone.

Haldane ignored the comment and pointed to the papers of which there appeared to be a bushel. "I have been posting myself in my new profession, and conclude that the prospects for grain and live stock are encouraging," he said. "News from Chile, California and the Austral, all confirm this view; and, remembering it, we will consider Lane's position. Boone has taken considerable pains to discover that, as I expected, his resources are far from inexhaustible, and circumstances point to the fact that he has set his teeth in too big a morsel. At present neither the speculative public nor would-be emigrants have grasped the position, and therefore Lane would get little if he realized on his stolen lands just now."

"That is plain; but what results from it?" I said.

"Prosperity to poor men, according to my daughter"; and Haldane's smile was not wholly cynical. "We purpose that he should realize as soon as possible. Boone discovered that he is raising money to carry on by quietly selling out his stock in the Investment Company which has consistently backed him, and I feel inclined for a speculation in that direction, especially as the public will shortly be invited to increase the company's capital. Lastly, I am in possession of accurate information which Lane is not. Contrary to general opinion, the railroad will be hurried through very shortly."

It was great news, and the possible downfall of my enemy perhaps the least of it. It implied swift prosperity for all that district, and while I stared at the speaker the blood surged to my forehead. Though fate had robbed me of the best, part of what I had toiled, and fought, and suffered for was to come about at last; and the calmness of the others appeared unnatural. Haldane's eyes were keen, but he showed no sign of unusual interest; Boone's face was merely grim, and I guessed that the man whose heel had been upon my neck would fare ill between them.

"If he had used legitimate weapons one could almost be sorry for him," I said. "It will try even his nerve to lose all he has plotted for when the prize is actually, if he knew it, within his grasp."

"He deserves no mercy," Boone broke in. "This is justice, Ormesby, neither more nor less; and unless we cripple him once for all he will take hold again with the first bad season. What you will shortly hear should demonstrate the necessity for decisive measures; but our host forgot to mention that he declines to profit individually by this opportunity."

"If anyone wishes to learn my virtues they can apply to certain company promoters in Montreal," said Haldane languidly. "Boone will remember that I came here to farm for my health, and have been coerced into assisting at this Vehmgericht. Those wheels, however, give warning that the first sitting will commence."

A minute or two later I started wrathfully to my feet as Niven was ushered into the room. He on his part seemed equally astonished, and, I think, would have backed out again, but that Boone adroitly slammed the door behind him. It may be mentioned that he had been tried in my place, and, to the disgust of Sergeant Mackay, just escaped conviction.

"I need not introduce Mr. Ormesby, who will kindly resume his place," said Haldane pleasantly. "Sit down and choose a cigar if you feel like it. You sent word you wanted to talk to me?"

"I didn't want to talk to that man"; and Niven scowled at me, while Haldane shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't turn him out, you see. Now hadn't you better explain what you want with me?"

There was a languid contempt beneath the speaker's surface good-humor which was not lost upon the fidgeting man; but he lighted a cigar with an air of bravado and commenced:

"Thinking over things I figured both you and Adams had your knife in Lane"; and Haldane's mild surprise was excellently assumed. "Well, I've got my own knife in him, too. It's this way. Lane put up the dollars for me to buy out Ormesby, and made a mighty close bargain, thinking I daren't kick. It would have been inconvenient, and I didn't mean to; but when those blame police ran me in for a thing I never done, he just turns his back, and wouldn't put up a dollar to defend me! 'I've no use for blunderers of your kind,' says he."

"One could understand that it is necessary for him to make sure of his subordinates' abilities," said Haldane reflectively; and Niven, who stared hard at him, appeared to gulp down something before he proceeded.

"Well, he can't fool with me, and it comes to this. I'm recorded owner of Gaspard's Trail; paid for it with my own check—Lane fixed that up. Now, what I want to ask you is, how's Lane going to turn me out if I hold on to the place? Strikes me he can't do it."

In spite of this assurance the speaker looked distinctly eager until Haldane answered: "We need not discuss the moral aspect of the case, because it apparently hasn't one, and you might not understand it if it had. Speaking from a purely business point of view, I feel tolerably certain that, under the circumstances, he would not take legal proceedings against you, though I have no doubt he might arrange the affair in some other way."

"Feel quite sure?" asked Niven. And Haldane answered: "I may say I do."

Niven's grin of triumph would have sickened any honest man, but I was not sorry for his employer. "I guess I'll take my chances of the other way, and I'm coming straight to business. Will you stand behind me? It's not going to be a charity. There are dollars in Gaspard's Trail, and I'm open to make a fair deal with the man who sees me through."

I saw Haldane's lips set tightly for a moment, and my hand itched for a good hold of Niven's collar; but the master of Bonaventure next regarded him with a quiet amusement which appeared disconcerting.

"I fancy your worthy master was correct when he described you as a blunderer," he said. "It would be quite impossible for me to make a bargain of that—or any other—kind with you. You might also have added that he inspired you to more than the buying of Gaspard's Trail."

There was pluck in Niven, for he laughed offensively. "I got my verdict, and if you won't deal may as well be going. Anyhow, you've told me what I most wanted to know."

He departed without further parley, and Haldane smiled at me. "It would have been a pity to detain him, and Lane was wrong in choosing an understudy he could not scare into submission. That rascal will hold on to Gaspard's Trail, and the loss of it will further hamper his master."

Some little time passed, and Boone, who appeared impatient, said at last: "She is late; but Gordon may have been too busy to drive her over earlier, and she promised me faithfully that she would come."

Haldane said nothing, though he seemed dubious until there was another sound of wheels, and I had a second surprise when a lady was ushered into the room, for I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw that it was Redmond's daughter. She had changed greatly from the girl who called down vengeance on the oppressor when we brought her father home, although the glitter in her eyes and intentness of her face showed the strain of emotional nature in her. Still, she was handsomely and tastefully dressed, and carried herself with dignity.

"This is Mr. Haldane, Miss Redmond, and I am sure he will be grateful to you for coming," said Boone, who I noticed appeared relieved when the new arrival laid a packet upon the table. "I may explain for Ormesby's benefit that Miss Redmond, who is winning fame as a singer, has something of importance to show him," he added.

The girl's hand was very cold when it touched my own, and her movements nervous as she drew a book in tattered binding out of its wrappings.

"I hope Mrs. Gordon will spare you as long as possible, and that your visit to the prairie will do you good," said Haldane, placing a chair for her.

"Once I fancied I could never look upon the prairie without a shudder, but of late I have been longing for sunshine and air, and shall perhaps be happier when this over," said the girl. "It is a very hard thing I have to do, and I must tell you the whole painful story."

"We can understand that it must be," said Haldane gently.

"When I left home for Winnipeg I joined a second-rate variety company. I had inherited a gift for singing, and those who heard them were pleased with the old Irish ballads my mother taught me. So there was soon no fear of poverty, and I was trying to bury the past, when, the night I first sang to a packed audience in Winnipeg, it was once more dragged up before me. I came home from what the newspapers said was a triumph, and because one critic had questioned a verse of an old song I looked for a book of my mother's among the relics I had brought from the prairie. I found—this—instead."

Ailin Redmond ceased with a little gasp. And glancing at the dilapidated account book she touched, I wondered what power it could have to change her triumph into an agony.

"I sat all that night beside the stove trying to force myself to burn the book, and yet afraid," she continued. "Perhaps we are superstitious; but I felt that I dare not, and its secret has been a heavy burden ever since. Sometimes I thought of the revenge it would give me, and yet I could not take it without blackening my father's memory. So I kept silence until my health commenced to fail under the strain, and meeting Mr. Boone at Brandon, where I sang at the time Mr. Ormesby's trial filled the papers, I felt I must tell him part of my discovery. Had the trial not ended as it did he would have consulted with Lawyer Dixon. Afterwards, though I hated Lane the more, I pledged Mr. Boone to secrecy, and kept silent until, when I could bear the load no longer, I told my trouble to Père Louis. 'If you only desire vengeance it would be better to burn the book; but if you can save innocent men from persecution and prevent the triumph of the wicked, silence would be a sin,' he said. Then I wrote to Mr. Boone and told him I would show the papers to Mr. Ormesby."

I opened the battered volume handed me with a strong sense of anticipation, and, as I did so, the girl shrank back shivering further into her chair. Redmond's writing was recognizable, and I thrilled alternately with pity and indignation against another person as I read his testimony. Omitting other details, the dated entries, arranged in debit and credit fashion, told the whole story.

"Deep snow and stock very poor," the first I glanced at ran. "Received from Ormesby three loads of hay. Sure 'tis a decent neighbor, for he wouldn't take no pay. Entered so, if I ever have the luck, to send it back to him.

"Plough-oxen sick; horse-team sore-backed; seven days' ploughing done by Ormesby, say—dollars at harvest, or to be returned in help stock driving.

"Fifty dollars loan from Ormesby; see entry overdue grocery bill."

"Is it necessary for me to read any more of these?" I asked.

"No. If you are satisfied that he at least recognized the debt, pass on to the other marked pages," answered the writer's daughter.

I set my lips as I did so, for there was only one inference to be drawn from the following entries, which ran dated in a series: "Demand for 1,500 dollars from Lane. No credit, 10 dollars in the house. Lane came over, and part renewed the loan in return for services to be rendered. Black curses on the pitiless devil! Took twenty head of prime stock, to be driven to the hollow with Ormesby's. Started out with the stock for Gaspard's Trail."

There were no further entries, and Miss Redmond, who had been watching me, said, with a perceptible effort: "You will remember all those dates well. Now read what is written on the loose leaf. When I came in one night the book lay upon the table with that leaf projecting; but as my father was always fretting over the accounts, I did not glance at it as I replaced the book."

The writing was blurred and scrawling—the work of an unstable man in a moment of agony; and some of the half-coherent sentences ran: "It was Lane and his master the devil who drove me. I did not mean to do what I did; but when the fire came down, remembered he said 'any convenient accident.' I knew it was murder when I saw Ormesby with the blood upon his face." Further lines were almost unintelligible, but I made out "Judas. No room on earth. Lane says he is dying fast. You will hate the man who drove me for ever and ever."

I folded up the paper, and not having read the whole of it, handed it to the girl. "I am almost sorry you were brave enough to show me this; but I can only try to forget it," I said.

Miss Redmond's eyes were dry; but she moved as if in physical pain, and clenched one hand as she said: "That secret has worn me down for weary months, and I dare not change my mind again. I shall never rest until it is certain that wicked man shall drive no one else to destruction. You must show Mr. Haldane all you have read."

Haldane laid down the book and sat silent for at least a minute. "Will you please tell us, Miss Redmond, how far you can allow us to make use of this?" he said.

The girl shuddered before she answered: "It must not be made public; but if in any other way you can strike Lane down, I will leave it you. You can hardly guess what all this has cost me; but, God forgive me, the hate I feel is stronger than shame—and his last words are burned into my brain."

Ailin Redmond rose as she spoke, and I saw that part of Père Louis's admonition had fallen upon stony ground. Her face and pose were what they had been when she had bidden us bring the dead man in. She came of a passionate race; but there had also been a signal lack of balance in her father's temperament, and perhaps it was this very strain of wildness which had made her singing a success.

Haldane, with expressions of sympathy, led her to the door, and returning, sat staring straight before him with a curious expression. "I don't know that the stolid emotionless person is not far the happiest," he said at last. "She must have suffered a good deal—poor soul; and, even allowing that you had not seen those pitiful papers, I'm doubtful if you acted quite wisely, Boone. However, the question is now, how are we going to use them?"

"Nobody but ourselves must see them," I managed to answer, savage as I was.

"I would make one exception," said the owner of Bonaventure. "That one is the man responsible. It can be no enlightenment to him, and the fact that he would not suspect us of any reluctance to make the most of our power, strengthens our ability to deal with him."

Our conference ended shortly, and when we joined the others, I saw that Lucille Haldane had taken Redmond's daughter under her wing. How she had managed it, of course I do not know; but the latter appeared comforted already, and there was a gentle dimness instead of the former hard glitter in her eyes. Then, and it was not for the first time, I felt that I could have bowed down and worshipped the Mistress of Bonaventure.

It was evident that Boone had also been observant, for he afterwards said, with unusual gravity: "Women resembling Miss Lucille Haldane are the salt of this sorrowful world. There was only one I ever knew to compare with her, and she, being too good for it, was translated to what, if only because she was called there, must be a better."

I agreed with his first statement entirely, and took his word for the rest; but made no answer. Boone did not appear to desire one, and again a strange longing filled his eyes while the shadow crept into his face. I also remembered it was written that the heart knows its own bitterness.

XXV.

A CHANGE OF TACTICS.

The fires of sunset were fading low down on the verge of the prairie when I spoke for the last time with Beatrice Haldane, as it happened, beside the splendid wheat. It was changing from green to ochre, and there was a play of varied light athwart the rigid blades, which in its own way emphasized the symmetry of the tall figure in pale-tinted draperies. Miss Haldane was stately of presence, but it was symbolic of the difference between us that while we of the prairie ever turned our eyes instinctively towards the West she stood looking back towards civilization and the darkening East, with a cold green brilliancy burning behind her head. It matched the face projected against it, which was that of a statue, perfect in modeling, as I still think, if almost as colorless and serene. Beatrice Haldane was very beautiful, and every curve and fold of the simple dress immaculate and harmonious because it seemed a part of herself.

My threadbare jean clung shapelessly about me, there was thick dust on my old leggings, and a rent in my broad hat, which trifles were, by comparison, not without significance. Beatrice Haldane was clearly born to take a leading place, with the eyes of many upon her, where life pulsed fastest in the older world. I was a plain rancher, conscious, in spite of theories concerning its dignity, of the brand of rude labor and the stain of the soil; but at least my eyes were opened so that I had seen the utter impossibility of a once cherished dream.

"The prairie is very beautiful to-night, and surely this grain promises a splendid yield," she said. "I am glad that it is so, for it will leave a pleasant memory. I shall probably never stand beside the wheat again."

This, I knew, was true. Beatrice Haldane would leave for Montreal and Paris in a day or two, and, paying Bonaventure a farewell visit, had ridden over with her father, who had business with me. Strange to say, I could now contemplate her approaching marriage with equanimity.

"There are many drawbacks, but it is a good country," I answered thoughtfully.

Beatrice Haldane looked at me, and again I felt that she could still draw my soul to the surface for inspection if she desired to. I also fancied she knew her power, and wished to exercise it, but not from pride in its possession.

"And yet you can now hardly hope for more than a laborious life and moderate prosperity. The prairie is often dreary, and the toil almost brutalizing. Are you still content?"

The sympathy in the voice robbed the words of any sting, and I answered cheerfully: "It is all you say; but there are compensations, and I think no effort is thrown away. I can only repeat the old argument. One can feel that he is playing a useful part in a comprehensive scheme in the muddiest tramp down a half-thawn furrow, and that every ear of wheat called up or added head of cattle is needed by the world. Perhaps the chief care of three-fourths of humanity concerns their daily bread. Of course, our principal motive is the desire to attain our own, and you may not understand that there is a satisfaction in the mere discovering of how much one can do without, and, possibly as a result of this, that one's physical nature rises equal to the strain."

"And what do you gain—the right to work still harder?" she asked. "I can grasp the half-formed ideal in your mind, and it is old, for thousands of years before Thoreau, men enlarged upon it. Still, it has always seemed to me that the realization is only possible to the very few, and to the rest the result mostly destructive to the intellect."

I laughed a little. "And I am very much of the rank and file; but at least I have no hope of emulating either the mediæval devotees or modern Hindoo visionaries. We practice self-denial from the prosaic lack of dollars, or to save a few to sink in a longer furrow, and endure fatigue more often to pay our debts than acquire a bank balance. Yet the result is not affected. The world is better fed."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "It seems that whatever your motives may be these things possess virtue in themselves—but the virtues do not necessarily react upon those who practice them."

"That is true," I answered. "Perhaps it is the motives which count."

Beatrice Haldane looked away towards the dying fires. "There was a time when you would not have been content."

The wondrous green transparency had almost gone, the dew touched the wheat, and we stood alone in the emptiness, under the hush that crept up with the dimness from the east, and through which one could almost hear the thirsty grasses drink. I knew now that I had never loved Beatrice Haldane as a man usually loves a woman, but had offered an empty homage to an unreality. Still, the semblance had once been real enough to me, and I could not wholly hold my peace and let her go. Furthermore, she and her sister both possessed the gift of forcing the inmost thoughts from those they spoke to, and there was a power in the quiet voice stronger than my will.

"No. I once had my ambitions and an ideal," I said. "At first their realization seemed possible, but I had my lesson. Even when I knew the ideal was unattainable the knowledge did not lessen its influence, and now, while smiling at past presumption, I can at least cherish the memory. I think you must have known part of this."

Beatrice Haldane had by knowledge attained to a perfection of simplicity, and, while my own was either the result of ignorance or born in me, we met upon it as man and woman—the latter too queenly to stoop to any small assumption of diffidence.

"I guessed it long ago, and there was a time when I was pleased," she said. "That, when contact with the world taught me what we both were, I knew it was impossible, was doubtless well for you. You could not see that I was not the girl you knew in England when we met again upon the prairie. She had, in the meantime, bought enlightenment dearly; though whether it or her early fancies were nearest the hidden truth she does not know."

"In one respect you can never change to me," I said. "The sunny-faced girl in England will always live in my memory."

Beatrice Haldane smiled, though the fast fading light showed the weariness in her eyes. "Until you find the substance better than the shadow, and she must have always been unreal. Still, we are not proof against such assurances, and I am even now partly pleased to hear you say so. Do you know that you have shamed me, Harry Ormesby?"

"That would be impossible," I said; and my companion smiled.

"Hold fast by your blunt directness if you are wise," she said. "I was blinded by the critical faculty, and you rebuked me by clinging to your visionary ideal, while I—misjudged you. I do not mind admitting now that it hurt me horribly, the more so when I found that Lucille, being—and there is truth in the phrase—unspotted by the world, believed in you implicitly. It was because of this I allowed you to speak as you have done. I felt that I must ask your forgiveness, because we shall probably never meet again."

Whether Beatrice Haldane was correct in her own estimate I do not know; but she was the most queenly woman I had ever met, and I lifted the rent hat as I said: "Circumstances betrayed me, and you could do no wrong. Even if that had been possible, how far would one suspicion count against all the girl in England has done for me? Now it only remains for us to part good friends—and I wish you every happiness with full sincerity."

"Thank you!" said Beatrice quietly; and we walked back towards the house together through the velvet dusk without another word. I noticed that Lucille glanced at us sharply as we entered it.

"You will not forget our appointment in Winnipeg," said Haldane, as they drove away; and I stood still long after the vehicle had melted into the prairie. What I thought—or, if I could think of anything clearly, which is scarcely probable—I do not remember; but it was with a dreamy calmness that, now the worst had passed, I returned to Crane Valley.

Reluctance mingled with my anticipation when I proceeded to Winnipeg at the appointed time. The harvest was almost ready, and a brief holiday possibly justifiable in anticipation of that time of effort; but the journey was long and expensive, while, after our severe economies, I had fallen into the habit of slow consideration each time I spent a dollar. Steel laughed when I said so, and pointed to the grain. "It's easier to get used to prosperity than the other thing," he said. "There are plenty dollars yonder to start you clear again. If necessary you can remember you have earned a good time."

The sight of the long waves of deepening ochre which rolled before the warm breeze was very reassuring, though belief came slowly, and I had feared some fresh disaster for days. Their rhythmical rustle, swelled by the murmur of the wheat heads and patter of the oats, made sweet music, for their undertone was hope, while the flash and flicker of the bending blades presaged the glitter of hard won gold—gold that would set me, unashamed before my equals, a free man again. Then I was ashamed, and my voice a trifle husky, as I said: "I am certainly going to Winnipeg, Steel. If it had not been for the others the harvest would have left me in the grip of Lane, and now the time has come I mean to stand by them."

I boarded the cars the more contentedly that there was a note in my pocket from Lucille Haldane. "Father tells me the time is ripe for you and your friends to strike at last," it ran. "I want to ask you to assist him in every way you can; and wait anxiously to hear of your success."

I did not understand the whole plan of campaign, but gathered that Haldane, with the support of our prairie committee, would make a "bear" attack on the company—which, while the schemer held stock in it, had largely financed Lane—and looked forward with keen interest to the struggle. We others had done our best with plough and bridle, not to mention birch staff and fork; but we had hitherto acted chiefly on the defensive, and now an attack was to be pushed home with the aid of money and a superior intellect.

Haldane was in excellent spirits when, accompanied by Boone, he greeted me in Winnipeg station. "I feel less rusty already, and you look several years younger than you did a few months ago," he said. "But we have breakfast ready, and can talk comfortably over it."

The meal was a luxurious one, and Haldane's explanations interesting. "Mr. Boone has taken a great deal of trouble to inquire into Lane's affairs, with the assistance of a man Dixon recommended. Considering the difficulties, I hardly think I would have succeeded better myself," he said.

Boone said this was an unmerited compliment; and Haldane laughed. "Well, the result, as anticipated, is this: Lane has most of his dollars locked up in mortgages which he does not wish to foreclose on immediately, while we conclude that the rest are represented by shares in the Territories Investment Company, which concern proposes to increase its capital, and, as somebody has been trying to sell that stock in small lots quietly, one may decide that he is short of money. We purpose to scare off buyers and depreciate his shares by selling them in handfuls as publicly as possible; or, in other words, to hammer the company."

"There are two points I am not clear about," I said. "We have not the stock to sell; and wouldn't it be a trifle hard upon innocent shareholders?"

"We are finding out your capacities by degrees," said Haldane, with a quizzical glance at me. "In the first place, we take the risk of being able to procure it when frightened holders rush upon the market. If they don't—well, there will be a difficulty. In the second, there are not any, or only very few. The corporation is a semi-private concern—combination of second-rate sharpers of your friend's own kidney; and the few outsiders professional speculators who take such risks as they come—they are only now thinking of an appeal to the general public. Here is the latest balance sheet, and I presume you are not anxious to see a continuance of that dividend wrung out of your friends upon the prairie."

My anger flamed up once more as I glanced at the figures. I had seen how that profit was earned, not by the company's agents, but by careworn men and suffering women, who toiled under a steadily increasing burden, which was crushing the life out of them. I had also received a laconic message from a combination of such as these: "Have paid in —— dollars to the B.O.M. We'll sell our boots to back you if Haldane's standing in. Do the best you can."

Then I brought my fist down on the table as I said: "I'd walk out a beggar to-morrow before that should happen. If this concern only lives by such plunder, for heaven's sake let us demolish it. I can't eat another morsel. Isn't it time to begin?"

Haldane smiled, and touched a bell. "My principal broker should be waiting."

A little, spectacled man, with a shrill voice and insignificant appearance, was ushered in, and, as I inspected him, Haldane's choice reminded me of the Hebrew shepherd's sling. He appeared a very feeble weapon to use against the giant who had oppressed us so grievously. "Territories have been offering at several dollars reduction," he said. "Don't know why, unless it's the railroad uncertainty. You couldn't get hold of one under full premium until lately."

The speaker, in spite of his declared ignorance, answered Haldane's smile; and the latter said: "You can begin at a further five dollars down. Come round in the afternoon and tell us how you are progressing. Isn't there a race meeting somewhere about this place to-day?"

The broker said there was, and I was astonished when Haldane suggested that we might as well attend it, for this part of the conflict was evidently to be fought on wholly novel lines. We drove to the meeting, and after the monotony of Crane Valley the sight of the light-hearted crowd, hum of voices and laughter, gay dresses, and, above all, the horses, was exhilarating. Nevertheless, it was some time before the scene compelled my whole attention, for the issues of the business which had brought me to Winnipeg appeared far too serious to justify such trifling. By degrees, however, I yielded to the influence of the stirring spectacle, and was at length amazed to find myself shouting wildly with the rest when a handsome chestnut broke out from the ruck of galloping horses a furlong from the post. Then, indeed, for a few seconds I was oblivious of everything but the silk-clad figure and beautiful animal rushing past the dim sea of faces in the blaze of sunshine behind, while the roar of the hoofs and human clamor set me quivering. It was all so different from anything I had heard or seen upon the silent prairie. Boone returned presently, and I stared at the silver coins he placed in my palm.

"You don't look satisfied, Ormesby, with the result of your few dollars. Are you sorry I did not lay a decent stake, or have you been infected by Lane?" he said; and I answered him drily: "I'm sorry that, without telling me, you staked anything at all. It is so long since I had two bits to risk over such amusements—and it does not seem fair to the anxious men waiting on the prairie."

Haldane laughed. "It is generally wise to make the most of a pleasant interlude, because the average man does not get over many of them. If this strikes you as trifling, Ormesby, you will find grim enough amusement before we are through."

It was afternoon when we returned to the city, and recommenced the campaign by a sumptuous lunch, during which the broker came in. "I've been offering Territories until I'm hoarse," he said.

"There was some surprise and talking, but nobody wanted to buy; and, while it's an honor to serve you, I don't see much of a commission in this."

"If I know my opponents you will do," said Haldane significantly. "Take off two more dollars, and, if there are any buyers, don't let them think you're not in earnest. You can put another of your friends on."

The broker departed and left me wondering. It struck me that to reduce the value by open quotations should have been enough, without saddling ourselves with contracts when we did not hold the stock; but it seemed that cautious slowness was not Haldane's way. He next insisted on playing billiards with me, and played as well as I did badly, for my fingers had grown stiff from the grip of the plough-stilts and bridle, and we had small opportunity for such amusements upon the prairie. Nothing of importance transpired during the remainder of the day, but I have a clear recollection of how the throb of life from the busy city reacted upon me as we sat together on a balcony outside the smoke room after dinner. It was a hot night, and the streets filled with citizens seeking coolness in the open air. They seemed alive with moving figures that came and went endlessly under the great arc-lights glare, while the stir and brilliancy appeared unreal to me. The air throbbed with voices, the clank of the great freight trains made up in the depot, and the hum of trolley cars, while only one narrow strip of sky appeared between the rows of stores, and that strip was barred by a maze of interlacing wires. I felt as though I had awakened from a century's sleep upon the prairie.

"Somewhat different to Crane Valley," said Haldane, pointing with his cigar towards the crowded wires. "I wonder how many of those are charged with our business—it is tolerably certain that some of them are. We have cheerfully thrown down the glove, and now the forces of fire and air and water are all pressed into the service of spreading our challenge across the continent. There's a mammoth printing machine in yonder building reeling it off by the thousands of copies every hour in its commercial reports, and those papers will be rushed east and west to warn holders in Quebec or Vancouver to-night. Also, by this time, Lane, wherever he is, will be spending dollars like water to keep the wires humming. Feel uneasy about the explosion now you have helped to fire the train?"

"I feel curious as to why you should take so much trouble to help us, sir, and about the enemy's first move," I said.

"To keep myself from rusting, for one thing, and because Lane is the one man too many down our way," was the careless answer. "If that does not appear a sufficient motive I may perhaps mention another when we have won. As to the other affair, he will, so long as his means hold out, buy—or urge his friends to—while we sell. Just how far can you and the men behind you go?"

I named a sum, which Haldane noted. "With what Boone and I have decided to put up it will be enough if all goes well. If not—but we will not trouble about that. This contract strikes me as a trifle too big for Lane," he said.

I retired early, but scarcely slept all night. I felt that the struggle would commence in earnest on the morrow, and Haldane's words had warned me that our nerve and treasury might be taxed to the uttermost before we made good the challenge we had so lightly, it seemed to me, sent broadcast across the Dominion.

XXVI.

THE TURNING OF THE TIDE.

I ROSE early next morning, and a stroll through the awakening city, which was cool and fresh as yet, braced me for the stress of the day. Haldane looked thoughtful at breakfast, Boone was silent and suspiciously stolid, for he betrayed himself by the very slowness with which he folded back the newspaper brought him to expose the commercial reports. He handed it to Haldane, who nodded, saying nothing. It was a relief to me at least, when the meal was over, but afterwards the morning passed very heavily, for I spent most of it haunting a dark telephone box, where Haldane received and dispatched cabalistic messages. I did not approve of conflicts of this description, in which the uninitiated could neither follow the points lost and won nor see the enemy, and would have preferred the hay-fork and a background of sunlit prairie.

Noon seemed a very long time coming, and the report of the broker who arrived with it far from reassuring. "We have sold a fair block of stock, and I brought you the contracts to sign," he said. "Settlement and all conditions as usual. Each time we offered a round lot Graham's salesman and another man took them up."

"Lane is taking hold. He has stirred up his allies," said Haldane. "I'll put my name to these papers, and you can call down another few dollars when you start again. I suppose there is no other person selling?"

"No," said the broker. "There were a good many other men curious about our game, and I fancy one or two of them had instructions; but they did nothing. We'll work up a sensation during the afternoon."

It would have greatly pleased me to hear of other persons parting with their shares, but Haldane still looked confident, and Boone appeared to place implicit faith in his generalship. I, however, grew more and more anxious as the afternoon dragged by, for my sense of responsibility to the men behind me increased when each tinkle of the telephone bell was followed by a message reporting further sales. Somebody was steadily taking up the stock we offered, and when, for the fourth time, Haldane had answered my question: "Any sign of weakness yet?" in the negative, I could stay indoors no longer, and found it a relief to stride briskly through the busy streets towards a grain buyer's offices.

My own personal risk was heavy enough, but I also knew what it had cost my prairie neighbors to raise the sum they had credited me with, and I felt that, if beaten, I dare not return and face them with the news that, losing it all in an unsuccessful gamble, we had left them doubly helpless at the mercy of a triumphant enemy. The interview with the grain merchant was, however, in a measure comforting. He admitted that prices were improving, stated approximate figures which almost surprised me, and volunteered the information that when my crop was gathered he would be glad to make me an offer. If prospects were good in Western Canada, cereals were scarce everywhere else, and I returned so involved in mental calculations that I walked into several citizens, one of whom swore fluently. He wore toothpick-pointed shoes, and in my abstraction I had, it seemed, trodden cruelly upon his toes.

Boone came up while I attempted to apologize, and tapped me on the shoulder. "What do you think of this amusement, Ormesby? It seems to have had the effect of dazing you," he said. "You were walking right past the hotel as though your eyes were shut."

"To be candid I think very little of it," I said. "Still, I was working out a slightly complicated sum in my head to ascertain how much—counting every remaining beast, salable implement, and load of grain—would, when I have paid off Lane, remain my own."

"Planning your campaign for next year?" asked Boone, with a trace of dryness.

"No," I answered. "It will not be a great deal, but I'm open to stake the last cent on beating Lane."

"Good man!" said Boone. "We are going to beat him; and, to show that I am prepared to back my convictions, I may say that I have hypothecated every pennyworth of my English property already."

Haldane was waiting for us when we came in. "Our men have had a busy afternoon. All the shares they offered were bought up, and there is no sign of any weakness yet," he said.

We formed a somewhat silent company during the earlier portion of the evening. Haldane sat busy, pencil in hand, and finally passed a page of his pocketbook across to us. "I don't quite know who is backing Lane, but his purse is a tolerably long one," he said. "You see, we must produce shares, or the difference between their value at that time and the price we sold at, to this extent on settling day, Ormesby."

"Of which nobody would apparently sell us one," I answered ruefully.

Haldane nodded. "You mean, of course, to-day. A good many people may be willing to do so before this hour to-morrow—if not it will be time to consider seriously. Meanwhile the best we can do is to seek innocent relaxation, and I see that Miss Redmond is singing at the opera house."

I was hardly in the mood to enjoy a concert, though curious to hear Redmond's daughter; but inaction had grown almost insufferable, and when we took our places in the crowded building felt glad that I had come. The sight of the close-packed multitude and hum of many voices helped to hold in check the nervous restlessness I suffered from. Nevertheless, though a lover of music, I scarcely heard a word of the first three songs, and only became intent when a clapping of hands rolled round the building as a dark-haired girl stood forward in the footlights' glare. It was evidently she who had drawn the perspiring crowd together, and that alone was an eloquent testimonial, considering the temperature.

Ailin Redmond was very plainly dressed, and smiled her acknowledgments with a simplicity which evidently pleased the audience, while perhaps in compliment to them she wore as sole adornment a few green maple leaves. Then I settled myself to listen, and continued almost spell-bound to the end of the song, wondering where the girl I had seen herding cattle bare-footed not very long ago had acquired that power from. She was not, from a technical view, a finished singer, which was, of course, impossible; but Western audiences can feel, if, for the most part, they cannot criticise; and I think she drove the full meaning of the old Irish ballad home into the hearts of all of them. A wailing undertone rang through it, and the effect of the whole was best expressed as uncanny. It was no doubt the strangeness of her themes, and the contrast she presented to her stereotyped rivals, which had led to the girl's success.

In any case the applause was vociferous, and continued until the singer returned and stood still, with hands lightly clasped, looking, not at the expectant audience, but directly at us. There was also a curious expression in her eyes, which were fixed steadily upon myself and Haldane beside me. Then I gained understanding as she commenced to sing, for there was no mistaking the fact that she meant the song for us. It was a clever resetting of such an old-world ballad as I think no Anglo-Saxon could have written, which is perhaps just as well, for its burden was a mourning over ancient wrongs and hunger for revenge; but the slender, dark-haired girl held the power to infuse her spirit into me. My lips and hands closed tight as I saw, what I think she wished me to, Helen Boone dying in a sod hovel, and the wagon that bore the dead man rolling through murky blackness across the prairie.

Then I shook all misgivings from me, feeling that if every acre and bushel of grain must go, and we failed, they would be well spent in an attempt to pull down the man who had brought such things about. That others might suffer with him counted little then. They had clutched at their dividends—dividends wrung by him out of the poor men's agony; and the ignorance, which was scarcely possible, did not free them from responsibility.

There was dead stillness for several seconds between the accompanist's final chord and the tumultuous applause which the slightly puzzled audience accorded, while, when it died away, I saw that Boone's forehead was beaded and his lips slightly quivering. Even Haldane appeared less than usually at ease.

"Miss Redmond is a young lady of uncommon and even uncomfortable gifts." he said. "Women, as you will discover some day, Ormesby, are responsible for most of the mischief which goes on, as well as a large amount of good. For instance, it was the encouragement of one of them which helped to start me upon this campaign, and now, when slightly doubtful respecting the wisdom of the step, another must sing eerie songs with a purpose at me. I think we will walk round and wait upon her."

We did so, and Redmond's daughter did not keep us waiting long. She sailed down a broad stairway and stood smiling under the glaring lamps, very slight and slim and graceful, so that it seemed fitting Haldane should bend over the hand she gave him.

"There is no need for my poor compliments after the verdict of the multitude; but did you sing that song to us?" he said.

"Yes," said the girl quietly, while the smile sank out of her eyes. "We have a good many friends and hear much gossip, so I knew at once who was directing the attack on Lane's company. As to the song—I had some slight education down East, you know—its choice was not without a meaning. You will remember how, on the eve of battle, Shakespeare's ghosts prophesied to one man ruin and to another victory?"

"Yes," said Haldane, looking puzzled, "I think I do."

"Then"—and Ailin Redmond seemed to shiver a little—"do you think there are no ghosts upon the prairie?"

"I have not met any of them, at least," said Haldane; and the girl answered with infectious gravity: "That does not prove there are none; and, even if you call it a childish fancy, I felt as I sang that they will bring you victory to-morrow."

"You are far too clever and pretty to fill your head with such fancies, my dear," said Haldane. And when we went out into the open repeated, with a shrug of his shoulders: "In spite of her talents, that is a most uncomfortable young woman; but heaven send her prophecy comes true."

Again I passed a restless night, but our agent procured us admission into the inner precincts of the exchange on the morrow, and I began to comprehend the fascination which speculation wields over its votaries as I listened to the eager shouting and watched the excited groups surge about the salesman. Our little spectacled broker, however, chiefly held my eye as he flitted to and fro, and now and then gathered a mob of gesticulating men about him with a strident cry. Somebody accepted his offers on each occasion, and he approached us with an almost dismayed expression when the market closed at noon.

"You are an old hand at this business, sir, but I feel it's my duty to warn you that things don't look well," he said. "Your friends of the opposition are evidently able to stand considerable hammering. The sum you mentioned would be no use to pull us straight already; and unless there's a break pretty soon they'll squeeze you like a screw vise on settling day. It would be hard to figure the price they'll make you pay."

"You don't suppose I haven't foreseen such a contingency," said Haldane. "The break will probably come this afternoon—if not, to-morrow. Tell your allies to sell further small lots down at a moderate reduction."

Our lunch was, as the others had been, luxurious; but my throat was dry, and I could not eat. Boone's appetite had also failed, and I may have guessed aright at part of his story when I saw him, after thrice emptying his glass, glance still thirstily at the wine, and then thrust the decanter away.

"It is time to consider," said Haldane. "Unless somebody is scared into selling soon Lane and Company will be able to fleece us horribly on settling day; but experience of such affairs teaches me that the smaller holders must break sooner or later under a persistent hammering. Now, I don't mind admitting that I did not anticipate such an obstinate defence, and the cause of my interference is mainly this: I had promised to take my younger daughter a trip to Europe, but am not over fond of traveling, while Lucille Haldane is tolerably contented with her own country; so when she first suggested and then insisted that I should make a campaign fund of what it would cost I was not wholly sorry to agree, and figured that, with careful handling, the dollars might be sufficient to scare Lane into making some rash move. At present it seems that I was mistaken, and that before we break him I must throw Bonaventure into the scale. You may save your protests, gentlemen, I'm a born speculator, and my daughter has set her heart upon this thing. If she hadn't, I'd have a very great reluctance to being beaten by a single horse-power company."

"Every acre of Crane Valley I can find a buyer for goes in, too," I said; and Boone added quietly: "You have my uttermost dollar, sir, already."

Nothing of moment transpired until next day, but it appeared to me that there was an almost insupportable tension in the very atmosphere. Our chief broker was clearly excited, and his tone significant, when he called to inform us that, while no other sellers had followed his challenge, only very small parcels of the stock he offered were being taken up; and so the matter stood until the afternoon.

I was now very anxious as well as determined. It did not require much knowledge of such affairs to realize that unless other persons flung their shares upon the market we should be left absolutely at the mercy of the men who had the stock to sell; and while I had nerved myself to part with everything, it would be inexpressibly galling to strip myself to enable Lane to reap a handsome profit. Neither do I think it was mere lust of revenge which impelled me. The man was a menace to every struggling rancher's prosperity, and had shown no mercy; while —setting aside the fact that he deserved none—it seemed that my neighbors' right to existence depended upon our efforts to overthrow him. Haldane appeared unusually serious when I glanced at him.

"If nothing happens in an hour we shall have to hold a counsel as to how we may cut our losses," he said.

Half-an-hour passed very slowly, and then, warned by a message, we strolled into the market to find there was comparative silence in the long echoing room, as those who congregated there grew languid and drowsy under the heat of the afternoon. Its atmosphere seemed suffocating, and before I had been present long the suspense reacted upon me physically, for my throat resembled a lime-kiln and the superficial arteries of my forehead throbbed painfully. Boone, at intervals, moistened his dry lips with his tongue, and Haldane alone leaned calmly against a pillar jotting down figures in the note-book he held.

Then a few listless men gathered round a broker, and suddenly became intent, while a murmur of interest rose through the drowsy heat. The voices grew louder, the group swelled, and I started at the call: "Any more of you with Territories to sell?"

"It must be Lane and Company's last throw," said Haldane quietly. "Ah! The tide is turning. There is somebody who doesn't belong to us making a deal with him."

The bystanders surged to and fro about the speakers in a manner which reminded me of corraled cattle; others hurried towards them, and our broker's voice rang out: "I'll trade with you at two dollars better."

Then there was a confused shouting, "I'll beat him by another. Two more dollars down," and every unoccupied man in the room flung himself upon the crowd, out of which rose indistinguishable offers, comments, questions, and counter offers. These swelled into a deafening clamor, but through them all I could hear or feel the hurried beating of my heart, and my voice sounded hollow as I touched Haldane's arm. "Tell me the meaning of it," I said.

"We have beaten them," said Haldane quietly. "There are other men hurrying to sell. The weak holders have broken at last, and, because a panic is infectious, most of the others will follow them. Ah! It is beginning. There go the telegrams, and I hear both telephone bells. The fun will commence in earnest when the answers come in; and, meanwhile, a breath of fresher air would brace one. You may have noticed that it's a trifle choky inside here."

I had, but my feet seemed glued to the floor and my eyes on the swaying crowd, so that it cost me an effort to tear them free and follow Boone and Haldane into the open air. He presently led us into the grateful coolness of a big basement saloon, and, scarcely drawing breath, I emptied the contents of a tumbler filled with iced liquid through a straw, and then looked at Boone, who had pushed aside the glass set before him and reached out for the ice bowl.

"I have bought my experience, Ormsby," he said, with a smile, which once more flashed a sidelight on to his history. "In times like these it is better to confine oneself to nature's distillery. A cigar? No, thank you, sir. Do you feel like smoking, Ormesby?"

I did not, for, in spite of the cool beverage, the bite of tobacco would have been insufferable then;

but Haldane lay back in a big lounge chewing a cigar. He said nothing whatever, and though he appeared satisfied, the lines on his forehead had deepened and his face appeared older. In spite of my impatience we must have remained nearly an hour before our leader rose a little stiffly and proceeded with unusual slowness towards the scene of the conflict. It was raging fiercely. Some of the spectators howled like wild beasts, others wrestled with their fellows to reach the clear space in the center of the ring, and, standing on the plinth of a column, I could see gesticulating men hard at work with their note-books therein. How they were able to record any bargain, or comprehend an offer amid that pandemonium, was more than I could discover, for everybody interested appeared to be shouting at once, and the rest of the assembly cheering them on. One irate individual, indeed, dragged a neighbor backwards by the collar, and then plunged blindly into the midst of the circle when the other, retaliating, drove his hat down over his eyes.

Haldane listened keenly for several minutes, and then turned to me. "It's going our way, Ormesby. Holders are getting out as fast as they can, and various speculative gentlemen who have been waiting for the first sign of weakness are hammering them. We have done our part, and can safely leave the rest to them. See if you can give our broker this note for me, and then, if you have had sufficient excitement, we will take a drive round somewhere until dinner's ready."

I had certainly had sufficient excitement in that form to last the rest of my life, and managed to reach the broker without personal injury, after which we solaced ourselves with a drive through the city and across some very uninteresting prairie. I saw very little of either, and was conscious of scarcely anything beyond the all-important fact that Lane's power was broken, and henceforward my neighbors would enjoy the fruits of their own labor instead of swelling heavy dividends with three-fourths of them.

When we returned to the hotel our agent, who appeared in an exultant mood, was waiting us, and he positively beamed upon Haldane as he said: "It's an honor to work for a man with your nerve and judgment, sir, and we have whipped the last grit out of them. I let up altogether when I saw every outside 'bear' come ramping in; and, if you're inclined that way, we might cover a little quietly without stiffening prices."

I do not know what Haldane's instructions were. Indeed, the reaction of relief prevented me remembering anything at all very clearly, except that, as we sat at dinner, Haldane said: "I shouldn't wonder if those physicians were right, and I think I have made my last stake this afternoon. I dare say you understand, Ormesby, that as we could now purchase the stock below the price at which we sold there will be a profit upon the transaction. Individually, I did not undertake this operation as a speculation."

Haldane made light of our anxiety lest he should have suffered. "I have long known I should have to sink into idleness, and it was a good piece of work to retire on," he said. "But what about the profit?"

I had no hesitation about the answer. "It was no desire of profit which brought me here; and as one experience of the kind is sufficient, I intend henceforward to stick to my horses and cattle. I will not touch a dollar of the money beyond actual expenses, and would propose that, setting aside any portion necessary to secure us against reprisals and complete our work, the rest should be handed to Miss Haldane to distribute as she thinks best in charity."

Boone expressed his full compliance, and Haldane smiled at me. "Do you think you can run up a contra account in that way, Ormesby?"

"I believe we were justified; but, whether justified or not, I will not touch a dollar of the gains," I said. "I am also going back to the prairie, to express our deepest gratitude to Miss Haldane, to-morrow. As to yourself, sir, a good many hard-pressed men will never forget you."

Then Boone rose up gravely with a wine-glass in his hand. "The task is too big for Ormesby, or any other man," he said. "May every good thing follow the Mistress of Bonaventure."

XXVII.

ILLUMINATION.

The binders were clanking through the wheat when I next met Haldane at Crane Valley. Having embarked upon his new career with characteristic energy, he rode over from Bonaventure with his daughter to watch our harvesting, and incidentally came near bewildering me with his questions. Some of them were hard to answer, and I felt a trace of irritation as well as surprise, that a few hours' observation should enable him to hit upon the best means of overcoming difficulties which had cost me months of experimenting to discover.

Thorn, I remember, stared at him in wonder, and afterwards observed: "You and me have just got to keep on trying until we find out the best way of fixing things, and if our way's certain, it's often expensive. That man just chews on his cigar, and it comes to him. When I take up my located land and get worried about the dollars, I'm going to try cigar smoking."

"You will have considerably fewer of them, if you experiment with the brand that Haldane keeps," I answered, jerking the lines, and my binder rolled on again behind the weary team. When each minute was worth a silver coin, we dare not spare the beasts, and I had worn out four of them in as many days, and then sat almost nodding in the driving seat, with a deep sense of satisfaction I was too tired to find expression for in my heart.

Oat sheaves ridging the bleached prairie blazed in yellow ranks before my heavy eyes, and each heave of the binder's arms flung out behind me a truss of golden wheat. The glare was blinding, for we worked under the full heat of a scorching afternoon, as we had done, and would do, by the pale light of the moon. Thick dust rolled about us, clogging my lashes and fouling the coats of the beasts, while the crackle of the flinty stems, rasp of shearing knife, rhythm of trampling hoofs, and clink of metal throbbing harmoniously through the drowsy heat, was flung back by other machines at work across the grain. There is, however, a limit to human powers, and I must have been driving mechanically, and nearly asleep, when a clicking warned me that it was time to fit another spool of twine. I remember that during the operation I envied the endurance of the soulless, but otherwise almost human, machine.

Steel came up with his binder before it was completed, a creak, and a thud, and tinkle swelling in musical crescendo as the jaded team loomed nearer through the dust. There was a flash of varnished wood that rose and fell, and twinkling metal, and I saw the driver sitting stiffly with hands, that were almost blackened, clenched upon the lines, peering straight before him out of half-closed eyes, while the moisture that ran from his forehead washed copper-tinted channels through the grime. It was by an effort he held himself to his task; but that was nothing unusual, for the prairie does not yield up her riches lightly, and by the golden wake he left behind him the effort was justified. The earth had been fruitful that season, and harvest had not failed; while, having sown in deep dejection, uncertain who would reap, it was a small thing to strain one's strength to the uttermost to gather the bounteous yield. We were free already, and every revolution of the binder's arms set us so much further on the road to prosperity.

Twice I jerked the lines, but the team stood still; and I was preparing to encourage them more vigorously when Haldane and his daughter approached. Both had insisted upon me leaving them to their own devices, and now Lucille appeared to regard the beasts and myself compassionately.

"They look very tired, and they have done so much," she said, glancing down the long rows of piled up grain. "Is not that sufficient to justify you resting a little?"

"I am afraid not," I answered with a somewhat rueful smile. "You see prosperity has made us greedy, while all the grain cut up to the present belongs to Lane."

The girl looked indignant—Haldane thoughtful. "I have been wondering whether you would feel inclined to contest his claim for the balance of the debt," he said. "Considering that he has taken from you twice the value of his loan, and the story in Miss Redmond's book, you might be ethically and legally justified."

"No," I said. "I made the bargain, and intend to keep my part of it. That acccomplished, I shall have the fewer scruples about using every effort to utterly crush the man. All we cut henceforward is my own, and I can only repeat that I should be glad to devote every bushel to help forward his defeat."

"I think you are right," said Lucille Haldane, with a trace of pride in her approval, though her eyes were mischievous, as she continued: "It is, however, unfortunate you are so very busy, because, as father is riding, and the team a little wild, we had hoped you would have driven them home for me."

I climbed down from the iron saddle, shouting to Steel, and Lucille smiled demurely. "We could not tear you apart from that machine when you would grudge every minute spent away from it," she said. "Remember that Bonaventure is a long way off, and, even if we allowed it, you could hardly return before to-morrow."

I, nevertheless, fancied she was pleased at my eagerness, and, for Haldane had passed on, felt suddenly oppressed by the recognition of what I owed her. Yet had it been possible I would not have lightened the debt. I looked down upon her gravely, noticing how young, and fresh, and slender she seemed—bright as the blaze of sunshine she stood in—and then pointed towards the long ranks of sheaves and sea of stately ears.

"I am not in the least inconsistent, and would not be if every moment were thrice as precious," I said. "I remember most plainly that you gave me all this. Strange as it may seem, it is, nevertheless, perfectly true."

The girl blushed prettily, and then glanced from me towards the tired horses and standing machine, after which her eyes rested with approval on the stalwart form of Thorn, who came up urging on his plodding team.

"It would be something to be proud of, if one could believe you, Rancher; but I am not wholly pleased with the last part of the speech," she said, with a faint half-mocking inclination of the head. "I can guess what you are thinking, and you are a trifle slow to learn. Women are very well in their own place, are they not? You, however, find it perplexing when they will not stay there, but, because some of them grow tired of breathing incense, descend, and interfere in masculine affairs. It is truly strange that there should be more forces in the world than those centered in big dusty men and splendid horses!"

"You must be a witch; but I am learning by degrees," I said. And the girl laughed merrily.

"You have not progressed very far, to judge by the comparison. Witches are usually pictured as malevolent, old, and ugly."

"I meant a beneficent fairy; but the surprise was not quite unnatural," I said. "Who could suspect in such a slender and fragile person the power she possessed to banish gloom and poverty? Legions of men and horses could not accomplish so much."

"Now you go too far in the opposite direction," and my companion shook her head. "It is the sense of balance you need."

The sun-blaze turned the clustered hair under her wide hat into the likeness of burnished gold—the gold of our own North-west, with a coppery warmth in it—but the light in her hazel eyes eclipsed its brilliancy. The lithe figure fitted its gorgeous background of yellow radiancy, and again I felt all my pulses quicken as I paid Haldane's daughter silent homage. Magnificent as the wheat was alike to eye and understanding, when one remembered its mission, her presence seemed the crown and complement of all that splendid field. It was also somewhat difficult to refrain from telling her so, and my voice was possibly not pitched quite in its normal key, when I said: "It is short of the truth; but there is just one thing I would like to know, and that is, whether any other motive than pure benevolence prompted you."

"Why?"

Then I answered boldly: "Because it would be worth the rest to fancy that in some small measure it was due to individual goodwill towards Rancher Ormesby."

The girl lookd away from me across the grain, and, as she turned her head, it was with a thrill of pleasure, that may not have been wholly artistic, I noticed the polished whiteness of her neck, and how one little ear, dainty and pink-tinted like a shell, peeped out from the clusters of her hair. Then she laughed, perhaps at Thorn, who argued quaintly, if forcibly, with his reluctant beasts, and turned to me.

"If you desire another motive, you may conclude, as you heard before, that it was love of justice; which really ought to satisfy you."

"It is a creditable one," I answered. "But I fear that it does not."

We left Crane Valley shortly, Haldane on horseback, his daughter—because something had gone wrong with the Bonaventure vehicle—beside me in our light wagon, which, if it in no way resembled the cumbrous contrivance bearing that name in England, was, I was uneasily conscious, by no means over clean. On the way we met the thrashers, sturdy men, and stronger teams hauling the machines towards Crane Valley, for our thrashing is mostly done in the field. We stopped to bid them hurry, and Haldane, learning that they had met Gordon, whom he desired to see, bade us proceed while he looked for the rancher. I at least was not altogether sorry, and it was accordingly without him we approached the dip to the Sweetwater hollow.

The afternoon was waning, and the air very still. The tiny birch leaves had ceased their whispering; but the sound of running water came musically out of their cool shadow. All the winding valley was rolled in green, an oasis of verdure in the sweep of white-bleached prairie; and, pulling the team up between the first of the slender trunks, I pointed down towards the half-seen lane of sliding water.

"I might never have known you if it had not been for a trifling accident by yonder willow clump," I said. "I remember your sister suggested that very night that our meeting might be the first scene of a drama, and, considering all that has happened since then, her prediction has proved strangely accurate."

Lucille Haldane nodded. "It is a coincidence that I was thinking of the same thing, and wondering, now the play must be drawing towards its close, what the end will be. The meeting must, however, have been unlucky for you, because all your troubles date from that beginning."

"And my privileges," I answered smiling. "The present is at least a happy augury. When I first met Boone beside the river there was not a leaf upon the birches, and their branches were moaning under a blast which makes one shiver from mere recollection. Remember the harvest at Crane Valley, and look down on yonder shining water and cool greenery. It was you who brought us the sunshine, and even the memory of the dark days is now melting like the night's snow."

"That is exaggerated sentiment, and I have heard invertebrate youths in the cities say such things more neatly," commented the girl, with an air of mock severity, and then glanced dreamily into the hollow; while, as silence succeeded, fate sent a little sting-fly to take part—as, to confound man's contriving, trifles often do—in winding up the play. The team were ill-broken broncos which had already given me trouble, and when the fly bored with envenomed proboscis through the hide of one, the beast flung up its head and kicked savagely.

The reins which I held loosely were whisked away, and before it was possible to recover them both horses had bolted. The light wagon lurched giddily, and next moment swept like a toboggan down the declivity.

"Hold fast!" I shouted, leaning recklessly down; and the first shock of enervating consternation vanished when I gripped the reins. Still, there was cold fear at my heart when, bracing both feet against the wagon front, I strove uselessly to master the team. The brutes' mouths seemed made of iron, impervious to the bit; the slope was long and steep; birches and willows straggled athwart it everywhere, and the soil was treacherous. I could not break them from the gallop, and not daring to risk the sharp bends of the zigzag trail, let them go straight for the slide of the water in the bottom of the hollow.

It was not the first time I had been run away with. A fall from a stumbling horse or wagon upset is a very common and, considering the half-tamed beasts we use, by no means surprising accident in our country; but at first it was only by a fierce effort I shook off an almost overmastering terror as I contemplated the danger to my companion. I hazarded one glance at her, and saw that her face was white and set, then dare look at nothing but the reeling trees ahead, and strained every sinew to swing the team clear of them. Sometimes the beasts responded, sometimes they did not, and it was by a miracle the trunks went by. The wagon bounced more wildly, the slope grew steeper, and even if I could have checked the team this would only have precipitated a catastrophe. So I clung helpless to the reins until the end came suddenly.

Several birches barred our way, the brutes would swerve neither to right nor left, and with a hoarse shout of warning I strove desperately to hold them straight for the one passage, wondering if there was room enough in the narrow gap between the trunks. It was immediately evident that there was not. Simultaneously with a heavy shock, the wagon appeared to dissolve beneath me, and I was hurled bodily into the air. Fortunately I alighted upon soft ground, head foremost, and perhaps, because it happened so, escaped serious injury. It is possible I might have lain still partly stupefied, or spent some time ascertaining if any bones had broken under different circumstances; but, as it was, I sprang to the overturned wagon breathless with fear.

Lucille Haldane lay, mercifully just clear of it, a pitiful white figure, and my heart stood still as I bent over her. She was pale and limp as a crushed lily, but as beautiful; and it was with awe I dropped on one knee beside her. There was no sign of any breathing, coldness seemed to emanate from her wax-like skin, and though I had seen many accidents, I dare scarcely venture to lay a finger on the slackly throbbing artery in her wrist. Then I groaned aloud, borne down with an overwhelming grief, for with the suddenness of a lightning flash I knew the words spoken but such a little while ago had been more than true. It was she who had brought all the sunshine and sweetness into my life for me. Reason and power of action returned with the knowledge, and I started for the river at a breathless run, smashing savagely through every cluster of dwarf willows which barred my way, filled my hat with the cold water, and, returning, dashed it full upon her face. The action appeared brutal, but terror was stronger than any sentimental fancies then, and I dare neglect no chance with that precious life at stake.

The slender form moved a little, and it was with relief unspeakable I heard a fluttering sigh, then raised the wet head upon my knee, and fell to chafing the cold hands vigorously. The time may have been five minutes, or less, but I had never spent such long days in my life as I did while I waited, quivering in every limb, for some further sign of returning animation. It was very still in the hollow, and the song of the hurrying water maddened me. Its monotonous cadence might drown the faint breathing I listened for with such intensity. Even in that space of agony two other incidents flashed through my memory, and I understood my fear during the dark voyage, and on the moonlit night when the cars lurched across the bridge. Life would be very empty if the breath died out of that tender shaken body.

The suspense was mercifully ended. Lucille Haldane half-opened her eyes, and looked up at me without recognition, closed them, and caught at her breath audibly, while I held her hands fast in a restraining grasp. Then, as she looked up again, the blood came back, mantling into the clear skin, and she said, brokenly: "I fell out of the wagon, did I not? How long have I been here—and my head is wet. I—I must get up."

I still held one hand fast; but stooping, slipped one arm beneath her shoulder and raised her a little. "You must wait another few moments first."

The girl appeared reluctant, but made no resistance, and when finally I raised her to her feet I found it was necessary to lean against a birch trunk to hide the fit of trembling that seized me.

"I am not much hurt," she said; and my voice broke as I interjected: "Thank God for it!"

I fancied that Lucille Haldane, shaken as she was, flashed a swift sidelong glance at me, and that the returning color did not diminish in her cheek; then she said hurriedly: "Yes; I am not hurt, but I see the horses yonder, and you had better make sure of them. We are still some distance from home."

I turned without further speech, and found the vicious brutes, which had broken the wagon-pole, held fast by the tangled gear which had fouled a fallen tree. It was almost with satisfaction I saw the bolter had lamed himself badly. There was a change in Lucille Haldane when I led them back. She had recovered her faculties, but not her old frank friendliness; and said, almost sharply: "The wagon is useless. What do you propose to do?"

"To fold up the rug in the box, and make some kind of saddle for you," I said, and proceeded to do so, cutting up the gear, which was almost new, so recklessly that my companion seemed even then surprised.

"Do you know that you are destroying a good many dollars' worth of harness?" she asked.

"It would not greatly matter if I spoiled a dozen sets so long as you reached home safely, and it is a very small fine for my carelessness," I answered. "I should never have forgiven myself if you had been injured; but are you—quite—sure that you are none the worse?"

"I do not think I am much the better," said the girl. "Still, I am not badly hurt, and it was not your fault."

Though still languid in her movements, she seemed chary of accepting much assistance when I helped her into the improvised saddle, and then, because the other horse was useless, waded with my hand on the bridle through the ford. It was some distance to Bonaventure, and my companion was not communicative, but I did not find the silence irksome. Conflicting emotions would have made me slow of speech, and I was content with the fact that she rode beside me whole in limb and unspoiled in beauty. Indeed, so much had the sight of her lying white and apparently lifeless impressed me that I cast many apprehensive glances in her direction before I could convince myself that all was well.

Haldane, who overtook us, desired me to remain at

Bonaventure; but every pair of hands was needed at Crane Valley, and I wished for solitude. So, stiffly mounting a borrowed horse, I set off homeward across the prairie. I had risen at three that morning, after an insufficient rest, and was worn out in body, but clear in mind for a time, at least, while the brilliancy of the starshine and silence of the waste helped me to think. I was by turns thankful, ashamed, dejected, and eager to clutch at an elusive hope. Illumination had followed disillusion, and I knew at last that even while I was uplifted by vain imaginings, Lucille Haldane had, little by little, and unwittingly, extended her dominion over my heart. I had, it seemed, spent the best years of my life striving after an unattainable and shadowy ideal, while the real living substance, endowed with the best of all pertaining to flesh and blood, lay at one time, perhaps not wholly, within my grasp. It was true that the Mistress of Bonaventure was worlds too good for me; but with all her graces she was of like fiber to us, and her few weaknesses rendered her more desirable in proof of the fact. That Beatrice Haldane was worthy of all adulation remained equally true; but it was hard to comprehend how, blinded by folly, I had mistaken the respect I paid her for the warm tide of passion which now pulsed through me. Neither was the latter of sudden origin, for, looking back I could see how, little by little, and imperceptibly, admiration, gratitude, and tenderness, had merged into it until terror opened my eyes, and full understanding came at last.

There remained, however, one burning question—did Lucille Haldane, in any degree, reciprocate what

I felt? and this lacked an answer. Knowing her generous nature, it was clear that what she had done for me had not been done wittingly for a lover; but, on the other hand, I could recall many trifles which may have had their significance. Thus alternate hopes and fears surged through my brain until, when I had decided that, being yet a poor man, I must wait the advent of the railroad, at least, before putting my fate to the test, my thoughts commenced to wander, and I must have guided the horse home mechanically, for his sudden stopping roused me with a jerk to recognize the corral at Crane Valley. There is a limit beyond which no emotion may galvanize into continued activity the exhausted body, and we not infrequently reach it upon the prairie. I do not know whether I was asleep or awake when I led the beast into the stable, but the sun was high when Sally Steel roused me from a couch of trampled hay unpleasantly near his feet.

"You have had a tolerable sleep, and don't seem particular where you camp," she said. "Come right along, and do your best with the second breakfast I've got waiting."

I glanced with consternation at my watch. "Why didn't one of the others waken me? Do you know it's ten o'clock, Sally?" I asked.

"Just because I wouldn't let them! You've got to last out harvest, any way, and I guess Miss Haldane wouldn't have much use for a dead man," said Sally, and was retiring with mischievous laughter, when I recalled her.

"You have been too good a friend to me to make such jokes again," I said.

"I'm not the only one. All the folks are talking," said the girl.

Thereupon I answered grimly: "If I come upon any of them amusing themselves in that fashion I shall do my best to choke them."

XXVIII.

THE ENEMY CAPITULATES.

Some little time had elapsed since the overturning of the wagon, and I had seen nothing of Lucille Haldane, when, one evening, I visited Bonaventure at her father's request. All had gone well in the interval. The last bushel of grain had been thrashed and sold, and the balance of my debt to Lane, with every surcharge his ingenuity could invent, wiped out. Haldane, who remained some time in Winnipeg with Boone, had also concluded operations successfully, for, as he had foreseen, once the turning point was passed he had no lack of allies eager to assist in plundering the vanquished, and, before these had satisfied their rapacity, had been able to unobtrusively cover most of our sales without advancing prices. Boone explained that the new assailants considered the purchases a last effort on the part of the company's supporters. Also—because there is little mercy for the beaten—impoverished storekeeper and plundered farmer commenced to air their grievances, and it became evident that the company, or those it financed, had occasionally exceeded the limits of the law.

It was accordingly to a meeting of what Haldane called the Vehmgericht that I was summoned, and on arriving at Bonaventure found Gordon and several of our neighbors already there. The day had been sunny, but our autumn nights are sharp, with a sting of frost in the air, which made the crackling fire in the open hearth acceptable. A shaded silver lamp also flung a soft light about the room, which in no way suggested that it was to be used for a tribunal. There were decanters, cigar boxes, and British Columbian fruit upon the table, while Haldane lounged in a velvet chair, with feet, neatly encased in patent leather, stretched out towards the fire. All this seemed inappropriate to the occasion, even though I had grown used to Haldane's ways.

A glance at the others, however, showed that they were in deadly earnest. The men were lean and hard and grim, and their weather-darkened faces bore the stamp of the conflict. Some of them had long overworked brain and body, half-fed, that Lane and those who backed him might reap an iniquitous profit. Others had seen wife and daughter toiling in the dust of the harrows or riding weary leagues behind the herds, and had not forgotten. I noticed they accepted Haldane's offer of wine and tobacco dubiously, and surmised it was only personal respect for him which prevented disapproving comments upon this manner of procedure.

Boone doubtless guessed their thoughts, for he said whimsically: "I see no reason why you shouldn't have a good time, boys. There are easier ways of killing a coyote than beating his head in with the butt of a gun, and I can assure you that we mean solid business. For one, I find these cigars better than the tin flag plug."

"Tin flag!" and a man with wrinkles round his eyes laughed harshly. "Dried willow bark had to do for us. This kind of thing takes time to get used to after living for most two years on damaged flour and molasses. Maybe you're used to luxuries, and don't know what it is to see the wife fall sick when one couldn't raise a decent morsel to feed her with."

Boone's face grew as stern as that of the speaker, and the shadow I knew crept into his eyes. "I think I do. My wife died for want of comforts that Lane might twice collect his debt, and I am not likely to forget it to-night," he said.

A silence followed, and through it I heard one or two of the others draw a deep breath, while their faces hardened as they, too, remembered grievous injuries. For my own part I was grimly expectant, for I had suffered long enough, and had sufficient sense to know that it is not often struggling men had such an opportunity of dictating terms to a powerful adversary. We were all of us, I think, democratic in the word's most liberal sense, cherishing, however, no grievance against the rich, and quick to recognize advantages offered us by the capitalist's legitimate enterprise; but now the balance had swung to our side, equally determined to place it beyond the power of the man, who would have crushed us out of existence for the sake of a few dollars, to do further mischief. It appeared a duty to the community; but I had not studied human nature sufficiently to discover exactly how far that motive influenced us.

"If none of you have any further suggestions to make I want to ask if you are willing to leave this affair to me," said Haldane presently. "Lane is in his own way a smart man, and would be quick to seize an advantage which anybody, speaking without consideration, might give him. I offer my services merely because, during an extensive business experience, I have had to deal with such men before."

"There is nobody in the Dominion better able to handle this case for us," said Boone; and the others nodded assent.

"We'll sit tighter than graven images unless he turns vicious, if you'll draw his sting," said one. "That's no use, any way," a comrade interjected. "The insect would grow another one. What we want is his blame back broken."

"I will, metaphorically speaking, try to oblige you both," said Haldane with a smile. "He is a little weak in the spine already, or he would have declined to meet us at all."

Nobody made any further comment, but the eyes of most of us were turned expectantly upon the clock, until at last Gordon stood up when a rattle of wheels drew nearer. "This is going to be a great night, boys," he said. "The pernicious insects's come."

Next minute Lane entered, and nodded to us all comprehensively when he saw that Haldane did not hold out his hand. The man's assurance was apparently boundless, for he was at first sight as debonair and almost as genial as ever—almost, but not quite, for when he moved nearer the lamp I noticed a shiftiness in his eyes and an occasional contraction at the corners of his mouth.

"This is a little business meeting, and we appreciate your attendance; but the former is no reason why you should not be comfortable," said Haldane. "Sit down and help yourself to anything you take a fancy to. I need not introduce any of these gentlemen."

Lane was not readily taken aback, for, while we had afterwards cause to believe he had never discovered the movements of Boone, he looked at him significantly, but without surprise. "I know—all—of them. With thanks, I will," he said. "As to the visit, I am always ready to oblige my clients; but as you know time means dollars, it remains to be seen whose bill I shall charge it in."

I took the last sentence as a preliminary defiance, and fancied Haldane did so too; but he only laughed as he said: "I should not wonder if you were not paid that bill."

Lane nodded, as though he understood that the swords were crossed, and when he poured himself out a glass of wine the rest of us prepared to watch the duel with the comforting assurance that our champion was armed with the better weapons as well as the justice of his quarrel. It was also characteristic of the enemy that he smiled indulgently when, as he raised his glass to his lips, Steel and another man thrust their own aside. The inference could not have been plainer.

"Suppose we come straight to business," said Haldane presently. "It may save time if I recapitulate what is known of your position. If I am wrong in details you can, of course, correct me."

"You can sail ahead," and Lane, stretching out his feet, leaned back in his chair in an attitude of contemplative attention.

"To commence with, you hold a number of mortgages on land in this vicinity, from which, after recouping yourself from the loan, you are still drawing what I venture to call extortionate interest. These and your shares in the Territories Investment—

which cannot be sold—I believe represent your assets. Also, after taking first-class legal opinion, we find that, owing, shall I say, to indiscretions on your part, it may be possible to prevent you foreclosing on several of those mortgages, while one subordinate, I believe, refuses to be turned out of Gaspard's Trail. On the other hand, you have certain tolerably extensive liabilities I need not enumerate, and want money badly. Law-suits are expensive, and you have a promising crop of them on hand. It was with a view of obtaining it you suggested the issue of new Territory stock, and, seeing that hang fire, unobtrusively endeavored to sell your shares. I don't think the public would look at either just now. In short, you have taken too big a mouthful, can't hold on without dollars, and can't obtain them because, for some reason, respectable banks fight shy of you. It will simplify matters if you admit all this."

"I'm not going to admit anything," Lane said sturdily, after absorbing another glass of wine.

Haldane smiled as he answered: "In that case we will take what I have said for granted. Now, we have the money, time, and determination to fight you over every mortgage, and rake up, as a claim for damages, every indiscretion."

One of the listeners chuckled in a manner expressive of surprise and satisfaction when Haldane ceased, and through the brief stillness which followed I could feel, if I could not see, that the others were in a state of strung-up expectancy.

"Better come to the point," Lane said. "The question is, what do you want from me?"

"It's pretty simple," was Haldane's answer. "We want you out of this country. It's unfortunate that we can't help considering you an obstacle in the way of its prosperity, but, not being highway robbers, are open to make you a fair offer for your property. Here is a schedule I have drawn up, and you will see by examination that we purpose to buy the mortgages at their face value, paying you an interest due at current bank rates. We also purpose to buy back the lands you have already foreclosed on upon the same conditions."

Lane was difficult to astonish, but now he actually gasped; and several of those present, who were still within his clutches, sprang to their feet. "A glacier wouldn't be cooler than you! You must know they're worth, or will be, about three times as much," said he.

"Exactly," said Haldane; and Gordon and another chuckled silently. "That is just why we want to see you safely out of this country. The man who drives that kind of bargain gives nobody else a show. Please sit down. I'll answer your questions later, gentlemen."

I think Lane, in spite of his refusal to admit anything, must have felt himself driven into a corner. Indeed, for almost the first time during my acquaintance with him he showed signs of temper, for his lips straightened, and there was a gleam of malice in his eyes.

"Your hand looks a good one, but it's not good enough," he said. "I'm going to stop right here and tell you to do your worst. Say, don't you count too much on Mr. Haldane, the rest of you. If this is fun to him it's bread and cheese to me, and I don't let up on my living easily. Stand out from under before he gets tired and the roof falls on you. You all of you know me."

The listeners had good reason to do so; but they had not only lost their fear of him—the fear which makes a coward of a brave man when he becomes a debtor—but had found his yoke so galling that they would have risked the worst by defying him in spite of it. He must have read as much in the contemptuous laugh and lowering faces.

"I think we could beat you with it; but we hold still better cards," said Haldane quietly. "For instance, you have squeezed Niven a little too hard, and he is prepared to risk his liberty to testify on one or two points against you. I refer to incidents connected with Gaspard's Trail."

Lane brought his hand down on the table, and, for some unexplainable reason, I actually believed him as he said: "Gaspard's Trail was burnt by accident."

"We won't question the statement," said Haldane. "It was, at least, an accident that you were quick to profit by. This ace, however, takes the trick. Just run through this account book, and—remembering that we can produce Miss Redmond, and three men, who will swear to what her father said when Ormesby's cattle, which did not get there by accident, were burnt in the fence—consider what might be done with it."

Lane seemed to shake himself together after he had read the first few entries; while watching him closely, I once more saw the tell-tale contraction at the corners of his mouth. This was the only sign he made, however, save that presently he moved forward a little in his chair, which was close before the fire, and held up the torn-out page as though he wished the lamplight to fall upon it more directly. The action, which was made very naturally, suggested nothing to myself or even Haldane; but when the reader moved again, Boone rose suddenly and laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"You have had time enough to grasp the significance of what is written there, and I'll take the papers back," he said. "Of course, knowing who we dealt with we have a duly attested copy."

I do not know whether Lane had actually intended to destroy part at least of the dead man's testimony or not; but he was capable of anything, and the fire was hot. In any case, he calmly handed book and paper back to Boone with the careless comment: "You thought of that? Must be considerably smarter than you used to be."

"Yes," said Boone drily, "I have learned a good deal since I first met you. We will now, with Mr. Haldane's concurrence, give you five, or, if necessary, ten minutes, to consider your decision in."

Without being in the least sorry for him, I fancied I could understand the feelings of Lane, and his state of mind could not have been enviable. It is true that Haldane's offer allowed him a fair return for all sums invested, perhaps almost as much as he would have obtained by legitimate enterprise; but that must have been as nothing to the man who had schemed for a fortune, while one could have fancied that he found it inexpressibly galling to discover those he had considered his helpless dupes now held him at their mercy. Yet he showed small sign of discomfiture, and his voice was steady as he said: "It's robbery, but I'm open to admit you have fixed the thing tolerably neatly. Suppose it was Dixon who gave you the pointers? This man here must have some grit, for he knows that even now I could make it hot for him. Do you know who he is?"

"I consider the terms are liberal, and we arranged the affair ourselves," said Haldane. "You could hardly expect Mr. Dixon to involve himself in what I'm afraid is virtually the compounding of a felony. It is also possible some folks would call our proceedings by unpleasant names, but you left us no choice of weapons. We might have squeezed you further, but I believe it's wise to leave a back way open for a beaten enemy. I am perfectly acquainted with Mr. Boone's history, and understand that now his work is finished—for most of the scheme was his—he will surrender himself to the police. He does not, however, apprehend any trouble with them, because by the time he does so the prosecutor will have removed himself across the frontier. Now, hadn't you better consider your decision?"

Lane sat still for at least five minutes, and I could see that some of the rest were not quite convinced that the battle was over. They had experienced such a taste of his quality that they probably rather expected some bold counter move than submission. Nevertheless, the man was beaten, for at last he said: "It's your game. I must have the dollars down, and your solemn promise you'll make no use of what you know until I'm across the frontier."

"If you will meet me at Gordon's at noon to-morrow we'll settle the bill together," said Haldane quietly; and rose as if to signify that the interview was over.

Lane no longer looked jaunty, for, although he evinced no great dismay, there was a subtle change in him as he also arose and brushed the dust off his hat. "Everybody gets tripped up now and then, and must make the best of it," he said. "Quaint, isn't it, that it should be a man of Ormesby's kind who most helped to bring me up? Well, it seems I can't stay any longer with you, boys; but no one knows what may happen, and I'll try to square the deal with you if ever I come back again."

Nobody answered him, and with a shrug of his shoulders he passed out of the room; but though I fancied that was the last I should see of him I was mistaken.

Then Boone said reflectively: "I wonder if we have been too easy with him, sir. I can't help feeling, by the way he yielded, that the rascal has something up his sleeve."

Before our host could answer he was plied with congratulations and questions about the money for the redemption of the mortgages, and, raising his hand for silence, stood up smiling on the men before him.

"I'll find a portion of it in the meantime, and there is the profit on the campaign fund you raised," he said. "You needn't be bashful, gentlemen. I'm a business man, and will have no objection to charging you three or four per cent. more interest than the banks. It will, considering the prospects, be money sunk on good security. Now we have got our stumbling-block out of the way I see possibilities for this district, and am going to presently ask you to form a committee to consider whether we can't put up a small flour mill or co-operative dairy."

He proceeded to sketch out a project with a vigor of conception and grasp of practical details which astonished the listeners, who presently departed with sincere if not very neatly expressed gratitude, and hope and exultation in their weather-darkened faces. I tried to express my own sentiments and, I believe, failed, but Haldane smiled quaintly.

"Don't make any mistake, Ormesby. I'm not setting up as a public benefactor," he said. "One can't do absolutely nothing, and I don't quite see why I shouldn't earn a few honest dollars where I can. I dare say the others will profit, and I would prefer them as friends rather than enemies; but this scheme is going to pay me—in fact, as you say here—it has just got to."

XXIX.

THE EXIT OF LANE.

Early one evening, after Lane's capitulation, I sat in the hall at Bonaventure waiting its owner's return. Lucille Haldane occupied the window seat opposite me, sewing with an assiduity which, while slightly irritating, did not altogether displease me. Since the wagon accident she had, in an indefinite manner, been less cordial, and I, on my part, was conscious of an unwonted restraint in her presence. It is unnecessary to say that she made a pretty picture with the square of still sunlit prairie behind her, though her face was tantalizingly hidden in shadow, and I could only admire the graceful pose of her figure and the lissom play of the little white fingers across the embroidery. The girl must have been sensible of my furtive regards, for at last she laid down the sewing and looked up sharply.

"Is there nothing among all those papers worth your attention, or have you taken an interest in embroidery?" she asked, pointing to the littered journals upon the table. "Do you know that it is a little disconcerting to be watched when at work?"

I was uneasily conscious that my forehead grew hot, but hoped the hue wind and sun had set upon it would hide the fact. "Don't you think the trespass was almost justifiable?" I said. "You are responsible for spoiling us; and unaccustomed prosperity must be commencing to make me lazy. I was thinking."

"That is really interesting," said the girl. "Has sudden prosperity also rendered you incapable of expressing your thoughts in speech?"

In this case, circumstances had certainly done so. I had been thinking how pretty and desirable the speaker looked; but the trouble was that, although silence cost me an effort, I could not tell her so. I hoped to say as much, and more beside, some day; but the moment was not opportune. Lucille Haldane was Mistress of Bonaventure, and I as yet a struggling man, who, thanks to her good nature and her father's business skill, had barely escaped sinking into poverty. It would be time to speak when my position was a little more secure. Meanwhile, in spite of the sternly repressed longing and uncertainty which daily grew more painful, it was very pleasant to bask in the sunshine of her presence, and I dare not risk ending the privilege prematurely.

"I was thinking what a change has come over this part of the prairie," I said, framing but one portion of my thoughts into words. "Not long ago one saw nothing but anxious faces and gloomy looks; while now, I fancy, there is only one downcast man in all the vicinity, and he the one your father and Boone have just parted from. The change, considering that a single person is chiefly responsible, is almost magical; but, remembering a past rebuke, that hardly sounds very pretty, does it?"

Lucille Haldane laughed mischievously. "To one of the superior sex; but are you not forgetting that this season the heavens fought for you? It certainly might have been more neatly expressed. Do you know that the education you mentioned is not quite finished yet?"

"I know there is much you could teach me if you would," I said, with a humility which was not assumed, choking down bolder words which had almost forced themselves into utterance; and perhaps the effort left its trace on me, for Lucille turned her head towards the prairie.

"Here is Sergeant Mackay. I wonder what he wants," she said.

Mackay, dusty and damp with perspiration, was ushered in a few minutes later, and for the first time I felt all the bitterness of jealousy as I saw the friendly manner in which the girl greeted Cotton, who followed him. There was nothing of the coquette in Lucille Haldane, and the knowledge of this added to the sting; but I did not think that even she was always so unnecessarily gracious. Mackay, however, appeared intent and grim, and by no means in a humor for casual conversation.

"I'm wanting your father and fresh horses at once, Miss Haldane," he said. "Ye had a visit from Lane yesterday?"

"We certainly had. What do you want with him?" asked Lucille. And Mackay smiled drily when I added a similar question.

"Just his body, and your assistance as a loyal subject, Henry Ormesby. Ye were once good enough to say ye could not expect too much from the police; but it's long since your natural protectors had eyes on the thief who was robbing ye. Niven, when he wasn't quite sober, told a little story, and there's another bit question of a debt agreement forgery. Ye will let us have the horses, Miss Haldane?"

Lucille bade them follow her, and I heard her giving orders to one of the hired men. Then she returned alone in haste to me. "You saw where my father put the book Miss Redmond gave him?" she said.

"Yes," I answered, wondering. "He locked it inside that bureau and put the keys into his pocket."

The girl wrenched at the handle, and I noticed by the creaking of the bureau how strong, in spite of her slenderness, she was. The lock would not yield, and she turned imperiously to me. "Don't waste a moment, but smash that drawer in!"

"It is a beautiful piece of maple, and whatever do you wish to destroy it for?" I said, and, for she had a high spirit, fancied Lucille Haldane came near stamping one little foot impatiently.

"Can you not do the first thing I ask you without asking questions?" she said.

There was nothing more to be said, and stooping for the poker, I whirled it round my head. One end of the bar doubled on itself, but the front of the drawer crushed in, and when I had wrenched out the fragments, Lucille drew forth the book.

"I know what my father promised, and there is Miss Redmond to consider. She has suffered too much already," she said, tearing out whole pages in hot hurry. "Sergeant Mackay is much less foolish than I once heard you call him, and I have no doubt suspects something of this. Can't you see that he could force us to give the papers up? I am going to burn them."

"That at least you shall not do," I said, taking them from her with as much gentleness as possible, but by superior force, and then positively quailed before the anger and astonishment in the girl's face.

"You are still so afraid of Lane that you would risk bringing fresh sorrow on that poor girl in order to protect yourself?" she said, with biting scorn.

"No," I answered stolidly, without pausing for reflection. "I only wish to declare it was I who destroyed this evidence, if there is any trouble over the affair."

I tore the book to pieces and rammed the fragments deep among the burning logs as I spoke, and when this was accomplished did not look up until Lucille Haldane called me by name. Gentle as she could be, I had a wholesome respect for her wrath.

"I deserved it," she said, with a bewitching deepening of the crimson in her cheeks and a shining in her eyes. "You will forgive me. I had not time to think."

Thereupon I longed for eloquence, or Boone's ready wit; but no neat speech came to my relief, and while I racked my clouded brains the girl must have guessed what was taking place, for merriment crept into her eyes. Then, just as an inspiration dawned upon me, as usual too late, a hurried tread drew nearer along the passage.

"It is Sergeant Mackay, and he must not come in here," said my companion with a nervous laugh, as she glanced at the shattered bureau. "Is it quite impossible for you to hurry?" Then, before I realized what was happening, she had placed one hand upon my shoulder, and positively hustled me out of the door. Hardly knowing what I did, I clutched at the little fingers and missed them, and next moment plunged violently into the astonished sergeant.

"Mr. Ormesby is ready, and so are the horses. I hope your chase will be successful," a voice, which sounded a little uneven (though there was a trace of laughter in it) said, and the door swung to.

Mackay looked at me curiously; and when we had mounted, said: "I'm asking no questions, but yon was surely a bit summary dismissal!"

"It's just as well you are not, because I am afraid I should not answer them," I said, and Mackay frowned upon his subordinate when Cotton laughed.

We had ridden a league before he vouchsafed any explanation. "I could not call in my other men in time, and as we may have to divide forces, demanded your assistance in virtue of the powers entrusted me," he said formally. "We'll call first at Gordon's on the odd chance our man is there, and pick up Adams, though Lane's away hot-foot for the rail by now I'm thinking. He had no' a bad nerve to cut it so fine."

"Did the confounded rascal know there was a warrant out?" I gasped, almost pulling my horse up in my indignation, as I remembered Boone's hint.

"We did not advertise the fact; but yon man knows everything, and I'm no' saying it's quite impossible," Mackay answered drily. "But what ails ye that ye're drawing bridle, Harry Ormesby?"

I drove the spurs in next second, and shot clear a length ahead, while, though the Bonaventure horses were good, the others had hard work to catch me during the next mile or two. If Lane suspected the issue of the warrant he had victimized us to the end, for he had not only tricked us into furnishing him with the means of escape, but sufficient ready money to start him upon a fresh career in another land. We met Boone and Haldane returning from Gordon's ranch, and while the former advised the sergeant that Lane must be well on his way to the depot by this time, I drew Haldane aside and hurriedly related what had happened at Bonaventure.

"Lane is a capable rascal, and will certainly catch the west-bound train. There is little to be gained either by wiring the bank," he said. "He insisted upon taking a large share in paper currency, and as the draft was one I had by me would no doubt arrange for his friends to cash it before I could warn the drawer. Do you know the bureau you smashed in cost me sixty dollars, Ormesby?"

I was endeavoring to express my contrition when Haldane laughed. "I am not sure that you are the only person responsible for the destruction of my furniture."

Mackay had started before our conversation was finished, and it cost Boone and I a long gallop to come up with him, while it was only by dint of hard riding that we eventually reached the depot some hours after the departure of the train. Mackay first of all wired to the stations down the line, and then explained: "That's just a useless duty. Yon man is keen enough to know he might find the troopers waiting for him. He'll leave the cars at the flag station where there's nobody to detain him, and, buying a horse at the first ranch, strike south for the border. It would be desirable that we grip him before he reaches it."

Because various formalities must be gone through before a Canadian offender is handed over by the

Americans, this was clear enough, though I did not see how it was to be accomplished until Mackay had exchanged high words with the station agent. A freight locomotive and empty stock car rolled out of the siding, and we took our places, men and horses together, therein.

"Sorry I haven't got a new bogie drawing-room for you; but it's getting time the police gave some other depot a share of their business," said the exasperated railroad official. I also overheard him tell the engineer: "You have got to be back by daylight, and needn't be particular about shaking them."

It was not the fault of the engineer if he did not shake the life out of us. Canadian lines are neither metalled nor ballasted with the solidity usual in England, and with only one car to steady it the huge machine appeared to leap over each inequality of the track. There was also nipping frost in the air, the prairie glittered under the stars, and bitter draughts pulsed through the lurching car. It was not an easy matter to keep the horses on their feet or maintain our own balance, but the swish of the dust and rattle of flung-up ballast brought some comfort as an indication of the speed we traveled at.

"It's a steeplechase already," gasped Boone, holding on by a head-rope as we roared across a bridge. "I looked at the gauge-glass, and the engineer can hardly have full steam up yet. We'll be lucky to escape with whole limbs when he has."

The prediction was fully justified, for the bouncing, jolting, and hammering increased with the pace, and I made most of the journey holding fast by a very cold rail as for my life, while half-seen through the rush of ballast I watched the prairie race past.

When one could look forward there was nothing visible but a field of dancing stars and a smear of white below, athwart which the blaze of the great head-lamp drove onwards with the speed of a comet. All of us were thankful when the locomotive was pulled up before a lonely shed, and while we dragged the horses out the man who drove it, grinning at his stoker, said: "I guess there's no bonus for beating the record on this contract?"

"No," said Mackay drily. "Ye have the satisfaction of knowing ye served the State."

By good fortune we found a sleepy man in the galvanized iron shed, and he informed us that Lane had alighted from the last train and started on foot towards the nearest ranch, which lay about a league away. Inside fifteen minutes we were pounding on its door, and the startled owner said that the man we asked for had bought a good horse from him, and inquired the shortest route to the American frontier.

"Four hours' start," said Mackay, as we proceeded again. "Ye can add another three for the making of inquiries and searching for his trail. It will be a close race, I'm thinking."

It certainly proved so, as well as a long one, because we lost much time halting at lonely ranches, and still more riding in wrong directions; for Lane had evidently picked up somebody, perhaps a contrabandist, well versed in the art of laying a false trail. Neither did he strike straight for the border, and after dividing and joining forces several times, it was late one evening when we found ourselves close behind him.

"Oh, yes! A man like that paid me forty dollars to swap horses with him and his partner, it might be an hour ago," said the last rancher, whose dwelling we stopped at. "Seemed in a mighty hurry to reach Montana. How long might it take you to reach the frontier? Well, that's a question of horses, and I've no more in my corral. You ought to get there by daylight, or a little earlier. Follow the wheel trail and you'll see a boundary stake on the edge of the big *coulée* to the left of it."

Though we had twice changed horses, our beasts were jaded; but there was solace in the thought that Lane was an indifferent rider, and must have almost reached the limits of his endurance, while, though used to the saddle, I was too tired to retain more than a blurred impression of that last night's ride. There was no moon, but the blue heavens were thick with twinkling stars, and the prairie glittered faintly under the white hoar frost. It swelled into steeper rises than those we were used to, while at times we blundered down the crumbling sides of deep hollows, destitute of verdure, in which the bare earth rang metallically beneath the hoofs. Still, the wheel trail led straight towards the south, and we pushed on, aching all over, as best we could, until I grew too drowsy even to notice my horse's stumbles or speculate what the end would be. Before that happened, however, I had considered the question and decided that there was no need for any scruples in seizing Lane if the chance fell to me. We had merely promised to refrain from pressing one particular charge against the fugitive, and were willing to keep our bargain, though he on his part had deceived us into making it.

At last, when only conscious of the cruel jolting and the thud of tired hoofs which rose and fell in a drowsy cadence through the silence, Mackay's voice roused me, and I fancied I made out two mounted figures faintly projected against the sky ahead. "Yon's them, and ye'll each do your best. We're distressfully close on the frontier now," he said.

Once more the spurs sank into the jaded beast, and when it responded I became suddenly wide awake. It was bitterly cold, and that hour in the morning when man's vitality sinks to its lowest ebb; but one and all braced themselves for the final effort. Boone, in spite of all that I could do, drew out ahead, and we followed as best we might, blundering down into gullies and over rises where the grass grew harsh and high, while thrice we lost the man who led us as well as the fugitives. Nevertheless, they hove into sight again before a league had passed, and it even seemed that we gained a little on the one who lagged behind, until, at last, the blue of the heavens faded, and grayness gathered in the east.

It spread over half the horizon, the two figures before us grew more distinct, and Boone rode almost midway between ourselves and them, when, as though by magic, the first one disappeared. Mackay roared to Cotton when, topping a rise, there opened before us a winding hollow, and Boone, wheeling his horse, waved an arm warningly.

"It's the wrong man doubling. Come on your hardest until the trail forks, and then try left and right!" he shouted before he too sank from view beneath the edge of the hollow.

There were birches in the ravine as well as willow groves, and the fugitives had vanished among them, leaving no trace behind. There were, unfortunately, also several trails, and, because time was precious, the noise we made pressing up and down them would have prevented us hearing any sound. Mackay, who in spite of this, sat still listening, used a little illicit language, and rated Cotton for no particular cause, while I had managed to entangle myself in a thicket, when Boone's voice fell sharply from the opposite rise: "Gone away. He has taken to the open!"

With many a stumble we compassed the steep ascent, and, as we gained the summit, the growing light showed me a solitary figure already diminishing down a stretch of level prairie. "It's our last chance!" roared Mackay, pointing to what looked like a break in the grasses ahead. "I'm fearing yon's the boundary."

Our beasts were worn out, their riders equally so; but we called up the last of our failing strength to make a creditable finish of the race. The *coulée* was left behind us, and Lane's figure grew larger ahead, for Mackay, who certainly did not wish to, declared he could see no boundary post. Then as the first crimson flushed the horizon, a lonely homestead rose out of the grass, and when Lane rode straight for it, the sergeant swore in breathless gasps. A little smoke curled from its chimney, for the poorer ranchers rise betimes in that country. We saw Lane drop from the saddle and disappear within the door, while when we drew bridle before it, two gaunt brown-faced men came out and regarded us stolidly.

"What place is this?" asked Mackay with a gasp.

One of them seemed to consider before he answered him: "Well, it's generally allowed to be Todhunter's Wells."

"That's not what I want," said the sergeant. "Where's the boundary?" This time the other man laughed as he pointed backwards across the prairie we had traversed.

"'Bout a league behind you. No, sir; you're not in Canada. This, as the song says, is 'the land of the free.' You'll find the big stake by the *coulée,* if you don't believe me."

"Beaten!" said Mackay, dropping his bridle; and added aside: "Whisky smugglers by their manners, I'm thinking"; while, as we endeavored to master our disappointment, Lane himself appeared in the doorway. He looked very weary, his fleshy face was haggard and mottled by streaks of gray; but the humorous gleam I hated shone mockingly in his eyes.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Sergeant; but you can't complain about the chase!" he said. "Even Canuck policemen and amateur detectives aren't recognized hereaway; and as there are two respectable witnesses, I'm afraid you'll have to apply to the Washington authorities. You can tell Mr. Haldane, Ormesby, that it's no use stopping his cheque. I don't think there is anything else I need say, except that, as I have booked all the accommodation here, they might give you breakfast at the ranch in the *coulée.*"

He actually nodded to us, and thrusting his hands into his pockets, leaned against the lintel of the door with an air of amusement which was not needed to remind us that he was master of the situation, and for the last time set my blood on fire. There was, however, nothing to be gained by virulence, and when Mackay, who disdained to answer a word, wheeled his jaded horse, we silently followed him towards the *coulée.*

"I wish the Americans joy of him," the grizzled sergeant said, at length. "There's just one bit consolation—we can very well spare him! and ye'll mind what the donce provost said in the song—'Just e'en let him be. The toon is weel quit o' that deil o' Dundee.' "

Boone, smiling curiously, closed with the speaker. "There is one thing I expected he did not do, and as it could hardly be due to magnanimity, he must have forgotten it," he said. "You will not go back empty-handed, Sergeant. Are you aware that you hold a warrant for me?"

Mackay pulled his horse up, and stared at him. "I cannot see the point of yon joke," he said.

"There isn't one," was the answer. "Now my work is finished, I see no further need for hiding the fact that, while you knew me as Adams, my name is —Boone."

Mackay still stared at him, then laughed a little, as it were in admiration, but silently. "I'm understanding a good deal now—and that was why ye helped run yon thief down. Well, I'll take your parole, and I'm thinking ye will have little trouble since the prosecutor's gone."

XXX.

THE LAST TOAST.

LANE troubled us no further, and there came a time when those who had suffered under him, and at last assisted in his overthrow, would laugh boisterously at my narrative of his hasty exit from the prairie with the troopers hard upon his heels. They appeared to consider the description of how, with characteristic audacity, he bade us an ironical farewell one cold morning from the doorway of a lonely ranch an appropriate finale, and bantered the sergeant upon his tardiness. The latter would answer them drily that the Dominion was well quit of Lane.

Some time, however, passed before this came about, and meanwhile winter closed in upon the prairie. It was, save for one uncertainty which greatly troubled me, a tranquil winter—for I had, in addition to promising schemes for the future, a balance in the bank—but not wholly uneventful. Before the first snow had fallen, men with theodolites and compasses invaded Crane Valley, and left inscribed posts behind them when they passed. This was evidently a preliminary survey; but it showed the railroad was coming at last, although, as the men could tell us nothing, there remained the somewhat important question whether it would follow that or an alternative route.

Also, a month or two later, Thorn and Steel sought speech with me, the former looking almost uncomfortable when his companion said: "I've been talking with Haldane about taking up my old place, and don't see how to raise the dollars, or feel very keen over it. We never did much good there since my father went under. The fact is, we two pull well together, and you have got the longest head. Won't you run both places and make me a kind of foreman with a partner's interest?"

The suggestion suited me in many ways, but bearing in mind what might be possible, I saw a difficulty. "I dare say we might make a workable arrangement, and I couldn't find a better partner; but haven't you Sally's interests to consider?" I said.

Steel smiled in an oracular fashion. "That's Tom's business," he said, with a gesture, which, though I think it was involuntary, suggested that he felt relieved of a load. "Sally is a daisy, and I've done my best for her; but though there's nobody got more good points, I don't mind allowing she was a blame big handful now and then. Of course, we are all friends here!"

"We won't be if you start in apologizing for Sally," broke in the stalwart Thorn; and as I glanced at his reddened face, a light dawned upon me.

"That's all right!" said the smiling brother. "There's no use wasting words on him. He has had fair warning, and I'm not to blame."

It struck me that the best thing I could do was to shake hands with the wrathful foreman, and I did it very heartily.

"He will think differently some day, and you will have a good wife, Tom," I said. "We'll miss you both badly at Crane Valley, but must try to give you a good start off when you take up your pre-empted land."

It must be recorded that henceforward Sally was a model of virtue, so much so that I marveled, while at times her brother appeared to find it hard to conceal his astonishment. She was more subdued in manner and gentle in speech, while I could now understand the soft light which filled her eyes when they rested upon my foreman. The former spirit, however, still lurked within her, for returning to the house one evening when spring had come round again I saw Cotton, who had once been a favorite of hers, leap out of the door with a brush whirling through the air close behind him.

"What is the meaning of this, Cotton?" I asked sharply, and the corporal, who looked slightly sheepish, glanced over his shoulder as though expecting another missile.

"The truth is that I don't quite know," he said. "Perhaps Miss Steel is suffering from a bad toothache or something of the kind to-day."

"That does not satisfy me," I said, as severely as I could, hoping he would not discover it was mischief which prompted me. "I presume my housekeeper did not eject you without some reason?"

"Why don't you ask her, then?" said Cotton awkwardly. "Still, I suppose an explanation is due to you if you insist upon it. I went in to talk to Sally while I waited for you, and said something—perfectly innocent, I assure you, about——. Well—confound it—if I did say I'd been heart-broken ever since I saw her last, was that any reason why she should hurl a brush at me? She used to appreciate that kind of foolery."

"Circumstances alter cases," I said drily. "Don't you know that Sally will leave here as Mrs. Thorn in a few weeks or so?"

"On my word of honor, I didn't," and Cotton laughed boyishly. "Go in and make my peace with her, if you can. I am positively frightened to. Say I'm deeply contrite and—confoundedly hungry."

Supper was just ready; but there were only four plates upon the table, and when I ventured to mention that Cotton waited repentant and famishing without, Sally regarded me stonily. "He can just stay there and starve," she said.

Even Thorn, who, I think, knew Sally's weak points and how they were counterbalanced by the warm-heartedness which would have covered much worse sins, laughed; but the lady remained implacable, and, as a result of it, Cotton hungry without, until—when the meal was almost finished—Dixon, who was accompanied by Sergeant Mackay, astonished us by alighting at the door. He brought startling news.

The first carloads of rails and ties for the new road were ready for despatching, and it would pass close by my possessions; while, after we had recovered from our excitement, he said: "I have been searching for a Corporal Cotton, and heard he might be here. Do you know where he is?"

I looked at Sally, who answered for me frigidly: "You might find him trying to keep warm in the stable."

Dixon appeared astonished, and Mackay's eyes twinkled, while after some consideration the autocrat at the head of the table said: "If it's important business Charlie may tell him he can come in."

Cotton seemed glad to obey the summons, and knowing that he had ridden a long way since his last meal, I signalled Dixon to wait, when Sally, relenting, set a double portion before him. It was, therefore, some time later when the lawyer, glancing in his direction, said: "You are Charles Singlehurst Cotton, born at Halton Edge in the county of Warwick, England?"

The effect was electrical. Cotton thrust back his plate, and straightened himself, staring fixedly at the speaker with wrath in his gaze. "I am Corporal C. Cotton of the North-West Police, and whether I was born in England or Canada only concerns myself."

Dixon smiled indulgently, and Mackay, looking towards me, nodded his head with the complacent air of one who has witnessed the fulfilment of his prophecy.

"If I had any doubts before, after inspecting a photograph of you, I have none at present," the former said. "Mr. Ormesby forgot to mention that I am a lawyer by profession, and Messrs. James, Tillotson, and James, of London, whose name you doubtless know, requested me through a correspondent to search for you. Having business with Mr. Haldane, I came in person. Have you any objection to according me a private interview?"

Cotton looked at me interrogatively, and I nodded. "You can safely trust even family secrets to Mr. Dixon. He is, or will be, one of the foremost lawyers in the Dominion."

Dixon made me a little semi-ironical bow, and when he and Cotton passed out together into my own particular sanctum, a lean-to shed, Mackay beamed upon me. "Man, did I not tell ye?" he said.

It was some time before Cotton came back, looking grave and yet elated, and turning towards us, said: "Mr. Dixon has brought me unexpected news, both good and bad. It is necessary that I should accompany him to Winnipeg. Sergeant, you have the power to grant me a week's leave of absence?"

Mackay pursed his lips up, and, with overdone gravity, shook his head. "I'm fearing we cannot spare ye with the new mounts to train."

Dixon chuckled softly. "I'm afraid Charles Singlehurst Cotton will break no more police horses for you. He has a good many of another kind of his own," he said. "He has also influential relatives who require his presence in England shortly, and have arranged things so that your chief authorities will probably even release him before his term of service is completed. The signature to this note should remove any scruples you may have about granting him leave."

Mackay drew himself up, and returned the letter with the air of one acknowledging a commander's orders, then let his hand drop heavily on Cotton's shoulder. His tone was slightly sardonic, but there was a very kindly look in his eyes as he said: "Ye'll no' be above accepting the congratulations of the hard old sergeant who licked ye into shape. It was no' that easy, and may be it galled ye some; but ye have learned a few useful things while ye rode with the North-West troopers ye never would have done in England. We took ye, a raw laddie, some bit over-proud of himself, and now I'm thinking we'll miss ye when we send ye back the makings of a man.

Away ye go with Mr. Dixon so long as it's necessary."

It struck me as a graceful thought, for Cotton stood straight, as on parade, with the salute to a superior, as he said: "I'll report for duty in seven days, sir," then laid his brown hand in Mackay's wrinkled palm. "Every word's just as true as gospel, and I'll thank you in years to come."

He took my arm and drew me out upon the starlit prairie. "I can't sleep to-night, and my horse is lame. You will lend me one," he said. Then when I asked whether he was not going with Dixon to the depot, he laughed, and flung back his head.

"I'm going to spend all night in the saddle. It will be best for me," he said. "I'll tell you the whole story later, and, meantime, may say that over the sea, yonder, somebody is dead. I know what usually sends such men as me out here, but while I would like you to remember that I neither broke any law of the old country or injured any woman, I wouldn't see which side my bread was buttered—and there are various ways of playing the fool."

"We have Mackay's assurance that the Colonial cure has proved a success, and in all seriousness you have my best wishes for the future," I said.

The corporal answered gravely: "If it had not I should never venture to visit Bonaventure to-morrow, as I intend doing."

"Visit Bonaventure?" I said, a little thickly.

"Of course!" said Cotton, with both exultation and surprise in his tone. "Can't you see the best this news may have made possible to me?"

I was thankful that the kindly darkness hid my face, and turned towards the stables without a word;

while, after the corporal had mounted, I found it very hard to answer him when he said simply, yet with a great air of friendship: "Although you were irritating sometimes, Ormesby, you were the first man I ever spoke frankly to in this country. Won't you wish me luck?"

"If she will have you, there is no good thing I would not wish for you both," I said; but in spite of my efforts my voice rang hollow, and I was thankful when Cotton, who did not seem to notice it, rode away.

I did not return to the house until long after the drumming of hoofs, growing fainter and fainter, had finally died away, and said little then. I even flung the journals Dixon brought, which were full of the new railroad, unread, away. My rival was young and handsome, generous, and likeable, even in his weaknesses. He was also, as it now appeared, of good estate and birth, and granting all that I could on my own side, the odds seemed heavily in favor of Cotton, while a certain knowledge of the worst would almost have been preferable to the harrowing uncertainty as to how the Mistress of Bonaventure would make the comparison. It also lasted for two whole weeks—weeks which I never forgot; for I could not visit Bonaventure until I learned whether Cotton's errand had resulted successfully, and he sent no word to lessen the anxiety.

At last I rode in to the settlement, whither I knew Haldane had gone to inspect the progress of the road, and met Boone and Mackay upon the prairie. "Has Cotton returned?" I asked.

"He has," said Mackay drily. "This is his last day's duty. He loitered at the settlement, and ye will meet him presently. I'm not understanding what is wrong with him, but he's uncertain in the temper, and I'm thinking that sudden good fortune does not agree with him."

I met Cotton, riding very slowly and looking straight ahead. He pulled up when I greeted him, and seeing the question in my eyes, ruefully shook his head. "I've had my answer, Ormesby—given with a gentleness that made it worse," he said.

He must have misunderstood my expression, and perhaps my face was a study just then, for he added grimly: "It is perfectly true, and really not surprising. Hopeless from the first—and, I think, there is someone else, though heaven knows where in the whole Dominion she would find any man fit to brush the dust from her little shoes, including myself. Well, there is no use repining, and I'll have years to get over it in; but it's lucky I'm leaving this country, and—for one can't shirk a painful duty—I'll say good-bye to you with the others at Bonaventure to-morrow."

I was glad that he immediately rode on, for while I pitied him, my heart leapt within me. Had it happened otherwise I would have tried to wish him well, and now my satisfaction, which was, nevertheless, stronger than all such considerations, appeared ungenerous.

When I reached it, the usually sleepy settlement presented a stirring scene. Long strings of flat cars cumbered the trebled side-track, rows of huts had risen as by magic, and two big locomotives moved ceaselessly to and fro. Dozens of oxen and horse teams hauled the great iron scoops which tore the sod up to form the road bed, while the air vibrated with the thud of shovels, ringing of hammers, and clang of falling rails. The track lengthened yard by yard as I stood and watched. In another week or two the swarming toilers would have moved their mushroom town further on towards Crane Valley, and I was almost oppressed by a sense of what all this tremendous activity promised me. It meant, at least, prosperity instead of penury, the realizing of ambitions, perhaps a road to actual affluence, also it might be far more than this; and I scarcely saw Haldane until he grasped my hand.

"It is a great day, Ormesby," he said. "No man can tell exactly how far this narrow steel road may carry all of you. Still, one might almost say that you have deserved it—and it has come at last."

"It will either be the brightest day in all my life—or the worst," I said. "Will you listen to me for two minutes, sir?"

Haldane did so, and then leaned against a flat car, with the wrinkles deepening on his forehead, for what appeared to be an inordinately long time. "I may tell you frankly that I had not anticipated this—and am not sure I would not have tried to prevent it if I had," he said. "I know nothing that does not testify in your favor as an individual, Ormesby; but, as even you admit, there are objections from one point of view. Still, this road and our new schemes may do much for you and—— Well, I never refused my daughter anything, and if she approves of you, and you will not separate us altogether, I won't say no."

I had expected nothing better, and dreaded a great deal worse; and my pulses throbbed furiously when, after some further speech, Haldane strolled away, with a half-wistful, half-regretful glance at his daughter, who approached us as we spoke. She was in high spirits, and greeted me cordially.

"You ought to be happy, and only look serious. This is surely the best you could have hoped for," she said.

It seemed best to end the uncertainty at once, and yet, remembering Cotton's fate, I was horribly afraid. Nevertheless, mustering courage, I looked straight at the speaker, and slowly shook my head. Lucille was always shrewd, and I think she understood, for her lips quivered a little, and the smile died out of her eyes.

"You are difficult to satisfy. Is it not enough?" she said.

Her voice had in it no trace of either encouragement or disdain, and a boldness I had scarcely hoped for came upon me as I answered: "In itself it is worth nothing to me. What you said is true, for I have set my hopes very high. There is only one prize in the Dominion would satisfy me, and that is—you."

Lucille moved a little away from me, and I could not see her face, for she looked back towards the train of cars which came clanking down the track; but for once words were given me, and when I ceased, she looked up again. Though the rich damask had deepened in her cheeks, there was a significant question in her eyes.

"Are you sure you are not mistaken, Rancher Ormesby? Men do not always know their own minds," she said.

The underlying question demanded an answer, and I do not know how I furnished it, for I had already found it bewildering when asked by myself; but with deep humility I framed disjointed words, and gathered hope once more when I read what might have been a faint trace of mischief, and something more, in my companion's eyes.

"It is not very convincing—but what could you say? And you are after all not very wise," she said. "I wonder if I might tell you that I knew part of this long ago; but the rest I did not know until the evening the team bolted in the hollow. Still," and Lucille grew grave again, "would it hurt you very much if I said I could not listen because I feared you were only dreaming this time, too?"

"It would drive me out of Canada a broken-hearted man," I said. "It was you I strove for, always you —even when I did not know it—since the first day I saw you. I would fling away all I own to-morrow, and——"

The words broke off suddenly, for Lucille looked up at me, shyly this time, and from under half-lowered lashes. "I think," she said very slowly, and with a pause, during which I did not breathe, "that would be a pity, Harry Ormesby."

It was sufficient. All that the world could give seemed comprised within the brief sentence; and it was difficult to remember that we stood clear in the eyes of the swarming toilers upon the level prairie. Neither do I remember what either of us next said, for there was a glamor upon me; but as we turned back towards Haldane, side by side, I hazarded a query, and Lucille smiled. "You ask too many questions—are you not yet content? Still, since you ask, I think I did not understand aright either until a little while ago."

Haldane appeared satisfied, though, perhaps, that is not the most appropriate word, for he himself supplied a better one; and when we were next alone, and I ventured thanks and protestations, laughed, in the whimsical fashion he sometimes adopted, I think, to hide his inward sentiments.

"You need not look so contrite, for I suppose you could not help it; and I am resigned," he said. "There. We will take all the rest for granted, and you must wait another year." Then, although Haldane smiled again, he laid his hand upon my shoulder in a very kindly fashion as he added: "Lucille might, like her sister, have shone in London and Paris; but it seems she prefers the prairie—and, after all, I do not know that she has not chosen well."

The story of my failures, mistakes, and struggles ended then and there, for henceforward, even when passing troubles rested upon us, I had a helpmate whose wisdom and sympathy was only equalled by her courage to turn to for counsel and comfort. Nevertheless, two incidents linger in my memory, and were connected with the last meeting of what had now ceased to be a prairie tribunal at Bonaventure. It was an occasion of festivity, but regret was mingled with it, for Boone and Cotton would leave us that night, and there was not one of the bronzed men gathered in the great hall at Bonaventure who would not miss them. Boone, it may be mentioned, had, after entering into recognisances to appear if wanted, been finally released from them by the police. At length Haldane stood up at the head of the long table:

"This has been a day to remember, and, I think, what we have decided to-night will set its mark upon the future of the prairie," he said. "Where all did well there were two who chiefly helped us to win what we have done, and it is to our sorrow that one goes back to his own country now his work is well accomplished. We will not lightly forget him. The other will, I hope, be spared to stay with you and share your triumphs as he has done your adversity. I have to announce my daughter's approaching marriage to your comrade, Henry Ormesby."

It pleased me greatly that Cotton was the first upon his feet, and Mackay the next, although it was but for a second, because, almost simultaneously, a double row of weather-darkened men heaved themselves upright. Cotton's face was flushed, and his eyes shone strangely under the candlelight; but he looked straight at me as he solemnly raised the glass in his hand.

"The Mistress of Bonaventure: God bless her, and send every happiness to both of them!" he said.

The very rafters rang to the shout that followed, and it was the last time that toast was honored, for when next my neighbors gathered round me with goodwill and festivity, Lucille Haldane became mistress of the new homestead which had replaced the sod house at Crane Valley, instead of Bonaventure.

It was an hour later when she stood beside me, under the moonlight, speeding the last of the guests. Boone halted before us, bareheaded, a moment, with a curiously wistful look which was yet not envious, and his hand upon the bridle. "It was a good fight, but I shall never again have such an ally as Miss Haldane," he said.

He had barely mounted, when Cotton came up, and I felt my companion's fingers tremble as, I think, from a very kindly impulse, she slipped them from my arm. Cotton, however, was master of himself, and gravely shook hands with both of us. "It was not an empty speech, Ormesby. I meant every word of it. Heaven send you both all happiness," he said.

He, too, vanished into the dimness with a dying beat of hoofs, and so out of our life; and we two were left alone, hand in hand, with only the future before us on the moonlit prairie.

THE END.

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